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PAKISTAN FREEDOM REPORT

Assessing Political, Civil, Economic, and Digital Freedoms in Pakistan

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STATE OF FREEDOM REPORT – PAKISTAN

Assessing Political, Civil, Economic, and Digital Freedoms in Pakistan



A Country Partner Institute of the
New Economy and Societies Platforms
World Economic Forum

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Preface

Freedom is often spoken of as an ideal, defended as a principle, and celebrated as a constitutional promise. Yet the true strength of freedom is not measured by how often it is invoked, but by how deeply it is experienced in the daily lives of citizens. It is reflected in whether people can speak without fear, participate without exclusion, work with dignity, seek justice without influence, and trust institutions to protect rather than restrict their rights.

It is with this understanding that we present the first-ever Freedom Report of Pakistan.

This report marks a historic national effort to systematically document, measure, and evaluate the condition of freedom across Pakistan's political, social, economic, and institutional landscape. While Pakistan has long been assessed through international indices and external reports on democracy, governance, media freedom, gender equality, and civil liberties, there has never been a comprehensive, nationally developed Freedom Report that brings these dimensions together through a contextual, evidence-based framework.

This report fills that gap.

The State of Freedom Report is not designed as a political scorecard, nor as an instrument of criticism for its own sake. It is a governance tool, a national mirror that reflects both progress and constraints. Its purpose is to move the national conversation on freedom from rhetoric to evidence, from assumptions to documentation, and from perception alone to measurable reality.

Freedom cannot be understood through a single lens. It exists at the intersection of constitutional guarantees, institutional performance, economic opportunity, social inclusion, digital access, and public trust. A citizen's freedom is shaped as much by the fairness of elections as by the accessibility of justice, as much by freedom of expression as by financial security, and as much by gender equality as by the credibility of institutions.

Recognizing this complexity, the report adopts a multidimensional methodology built upon three foundational pillars of liberty: Political Freedom, Social Freedom, and Economic Freedom. These are supported by institutional analysis and public perception data through the National TRUST Survey, covering more than 2,000 respondents across provinces, regions, urban and rural communities, and diverse demographic groups.

The report combines structural evidence, including constitutional provisions, legislation, judicial precedents, regulatory frameworks, parliamentary oversight, and institutional reforms, with lived citizen experience. This approach ensures that freedom is not measured only by what exists in law, but by what is felt in practice.

Pakistan's story is often told through extremes, either crisis or celebration. Rarely is it examined through structured evidence that allows nuance, balance, and institutional learning. This report seeks to change that. It acknowledges areas of progress, including reforms in digital governance, financial inclusion, women's participation, regulatory modernization, and judicial improvements, while also identifying serious challenges in political trust, institutional independence, freedom of expression, and equitable access to opportunity.

The importance of such a report extends beyond domestic governance. In today's interconnected world, freedom is not only a moral and constitutional imperative, it is also an economic, diplomatic, and strategic asset. Investors seek predictable institutions. Citizens seek fairness. Young people seek participation. International partners seek credibility. Nations are increasingly judged by the freedoms they protect as much as by the growth they generate.

For Pakistan, documenting freedom is therefore not only an internal necessity but an international responsibility.

This first edition of the Freedom Report is intended to serve policymakers, researchers, businesses, civil society, academia, media professionals, and citizens alike. It provides a baseline for future comparisons, provincial scorecards, institutional accountability, and reform prioritization. More importantly, it begins a national conversation that has long been overdue.

A mature nation does not fear measurement; it welcomes it.

The launch of this first-ever Freedom Report is therefore not the conclusion of a study, but the beginning of a process. It is an invitation to reflect, to question, and to improve. It is a commitment to ensuring that freedom is not treated merely as a constitutional inheritance, but as a living responsibility.

Pakistan deserves to know not only how free it is, but how much freer it can become.

This report is our first step toward that answer.

Puruesh Chaudhary

Amir Jahangir

Barister Rufruf Chaudhary

About Mishal Pakistan

Mishal Pakistan is an award-winning institution specializing in business intelligence, benchmarking, public policy, and strategic communications, with a strong focus on translating research into measurable impact. Working at the intersection of development, media, and information intelligence, the organization has played a significant role in strengthening journalistic standards, countering misinformation, and enhancing media credibility. Mishal Pakistan collaborates with governments, international organizations, the private sector, and civil society to design knowledge-based solutions that support economic development, institutional reform, and digital transformation.

Recognized for its data-driven approach, Mishal Pakistan serves as the Country Partner Institute of the World Economic Forum (WEF) and contributes to major global indices, including the Pakistan Reforms Report, Global Risks Report, Global Competitiveness Report, Global Gender Gap Index, Global Travel and Tourism Development Index, Global Growth Report, and the Network Readiness Index. Through its policy and governance advisory work, the organization supports evidence-based decision-making on economic reforms, governance innovation, and digital policy, leveraging artificial intelligence and big data analytics to advance governance modernization, predictive analysis, and strategic communications.

Mishal Pakistan has also pioneered the systematic documentation of governance reforms by launching and institutionalizing the Pakistan Reforms Report, the first comprehensive national effort to record reforms across ministries, divisions, and attached institutions. This initiative introduced a structured, evidence-based framework that moves beyond isolated announcements to provide continuity, comparability, and institutional memory, offering researchers, policymakers, investors, and citizens a credible lens to assess the scope and impact of governance change in Pakistan.

With deep expertise in economic competitiveness research, public diplomacy, and narrative strategy, Mishal Pakistan supports governments and institutions in perception management, policy communication, and crisis response. Through collaboration with international bodies, universities, and global think tanks, the organization continues to advance research-driven narratives, governance innovation, and responsible technology adoption. By integrating strategic foresight, innovation, and collaboration, Mishal Pakistan remains committed to shaping the future of governance, media, and public policy in Pakistan and beyond.

Acknowledgements

The publication of the first-ever Freedom Report of Pakistan represents the collective effort of numerous individuals, institutions, researchers, and stakeholders whose contributions made this important national initiative possible.

This report was conceived with the belief that freedom must be understood not only as a constitutional promise, but as a measurable reality reflected in the everyday lives of citizens. Transforming that belief into a rigorous, evidence-based national report required collaboration across sectors, disciplines, and institutions.

We extend our deepest gratitude to the research teams, policy analysts, data specialists, and field coordinators whose dedication ensured the integrity of this work. Their efforts in collecting, validating, and interpreting complex institutional, legal, and public perception data laid the foundation for the report's credibility and relevance.

Special appreciation is extended to the teams responsible for the National TRUST Survey, whose work across provinces, regions, and diverse communities helped capture the voices, concerns, and aspirations of citizens across Pakistan. Their commitment to ensuring representative and meaningful public engagement strengthened the report's most important dimension, the lived experience of freedom.

We are grateful to academic institutions, civil society organizations, legal experts, economists, journalists, governance specialists, and policy practitioners who contributed their insights through consultations, interviews, and expert reviews. Their perspectives helped shape the report's analytical depth and ensured that freedom was examined through a multidimensional lens.

We also acknowledge the support of institutions and stakeholders who continue to believe that evidence-based governance is essential for national progress. Their encouragement reinforces the importance of independent documentation, constructive policy dialogue, and institutional accountability.

As the Country Partner Institute of the World Economic Forum in Pakistan, Mishal Pakistan remains committed to strengthening governance through data, dialogue, and documentation. This report reflects that commitment by creating a platform where freedom is assessed not through assumption, but through measurable evidence and citizen trust.

A special note of appreciation is due to all respondents who participated in the survey and shared their perceptions with honesty and courage. Their voices form the heart of this report. Without public trust and citizen participation, no assessment of freedom can be complete.

Finally, we acknowledge that freedom itself is a shared responsibility. Governments may legislate it, institutions may protect it, but societies must continuously nurture it. This report is only a beginning, a first step toward building a stronger national conversation around rights, dignity, accountability, and opportunity.

We hope this report contributes meaningfully to that journey.

Amir Jahangir

Editor and Lead Author

The Freedom Report

Mishal Pakistan

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Executive Summary

The State of Freedom Report – Pakistan 2026 represents the first comprehensive national assessment of political, civil, digital, economic, and institutional freedoms in Pakistan. Developed through constitutional review, institutional analysis, stakeholder consultations, comparative global benchmarking, and the nationwide Pakistan National Freedom Perception Survey 2026, the report provides an evidence-based overview of Pakistan's evolving governance and freedom landscape during a period marked by democratic continuity, institutional modernization, economic stabilization, and rapid digital transformation.

Pakistan enters 2026 with a population exceeding 245 million people, making it the fifth most populous country in the world. Approximately 64% of the population is below the age of 30, creating one of the world's largest youth demographics and positioning Pakistan as a major future workforce and digital economy hub. Urbanization has crossed approximately 39%, while digital connectivity continues to expand rapidly, with over 195 million cellular subscriptions, 142–150 million broadband users, and nearly 70 million active social media users nationwide. Pakistan's fiber-optic backbone infrastructure now exceeds 230,000 kilometers, while international internet capacity has crossed 17.21 Tbps, reflecting substantial investment in digital infrastructure and connectivity expansion.

The report integrates findings from the Pakistan National Freedom Perception, TRUST Survey 2026, which surveyed approximately 2,000 respondents across provinces, territories, major urban centers, and demographic groups. The survey sample reflected a highly educated population base, including approximately 67% graduates, 32% Master's degree holders, and 1% doctoral degree holders. The survey evaluated public perceptions regarding political participation, economic opportunity, institutional trust, media freedom, gender inclusion, digital access, judicial effectiveness, and civic freedoms through a structured 1–7 perception scale framework.

The findings demonstrate that Pakistan's freedom environment is perceived as dynamic and evolving. Citizens expressed stronger confidence in areas such as occupational freedom, women's opportunities, religious freedom, and business facilitation, while concerns remain regarding economic security, information credibility, protest rights, and freedom of expression. Approximately 77% of respondents stated that citizens are free to choose their profession and occupation, making it the highest-rated freedom indicator in the survey. Around 75% believed businesses can operate without undue government interference, reflecting confidence in economic facilitation reforms and regulatory modernization efforts. Similarly, 75% expressed positive perceptions regarding women's opportunities and empowerment initiatives, while 65% viewed freedom of religion positively, indicating comparatively stronger confidence in religious and social inclusion frameworks.

Pakistan's constitutional and institutional framework continues to provide the foundation for democratic governance and civic rights. The Constitution of 1973 guarantees freedoms relating to speech, religion, association, movement, due process, and equality before law. Pakistan maintains a multi-party democratic system supported by parliamentary institutions, judicial oversight mechanisms, provincial autonomy structures, and electoral processes. During the 2024 General Elections, Pakistan facilitated participation for approximately 128.5 million registered voters through over 92,000 polling stations nationwide, with nearly 1.4 million election personnel deployed across the country. Parliamentary representation currently includes 336 National Assembly seats, including 60 reserved seats for women and 10 reserved seats for minorities, reflecting institutional mechanisms for inclusive political representation.

The report notes that despite periods of political contestation and polarization, Pakistan's constitutional transfer mechanisms and democratic continuity have remained operational. Public perceptions regarding

political freedoms, however, remain mixed. Approximately 64% of respondents expressed concerns regarding protest and assembly rights, while perceptions regarding political party operations, institutional neutrality, and political inclusivity reflected both optimism and reservations. The report frames these dynamics within the broader context of balancing democratic participation, public order management, national security considerations, and institutional stability in a rapidly evolving political and digital environment.

The assessment of civil liberties and rule of law highlights Pakistan's extensive legal and constitutional safeguards alongside ongoing institutional reform efforts. Judicial modernization initiatives, including digitization of courts, e-filing systems, alternative dispute resolution mechanisms, and administrative reforms, are identified as positive developments. At the same time, the justice sector continues to face structural pressures. As of 2025–26, approximately 59,191 cases remain pending before the Supreme Court, more than 450,000 cases before High Courts, and nearly 1.74 million cases within district courts nationwide. Pakistan's prison population has exceeded 102,000 inmates, with prison occupancy rates in some provinces crossing 160%, underscoring the importance of continued judicial and prison reforms.

Religious freedom and minority inclusion emerge as comparatively stronger areas of public confidence. Pakistan maintains an extensive religious infrastructure that includes more than 600,000 mosques, approximately 36,000 madrassas, 1,500–2,000 churches, and hundreds of mandirs, gurdwaras, and minority worship places across the federation. Survey findings indicate that 65% of respondents positively perceive freedom of religion and religious protections. The report also highlights state facilitation and security arrangements for major minority religious festivals and gatherings, alongside institutional participation in interfaith and cultural inclusion initiatives.

Pakistan's media ecosystem continues to rank among the most active and diverse in South Asia. The country hosts more than 120 licensed satellite television channels, hundreds of FM radio stations, extensive print media networks, and rapidly growing digital journalism platforms. Public information consumption has increasingly shifted toward digital platforms, with approximately 24.8% of respondents identifying Facebook as their primary information source, followed by WhatsApp (19.9%), websites and online platforms (18%), X/Twitter (15%), and traditional television media. While digital expansion has increased access to information and citizen participation, concerns remain regarding misinformation, online polarization, digital harassment, and media sustainability. Approximately 55% of respondents expressed reservations regarding access to unbiased information, reflecting broader global concerns regarding information integrity and algorithm-driven polarization.

Digital transformation emerges as one of Pakistan's most significant governance achievements over recent years. Pakistan now possesses one of the fastest-growing freelance and digital services sectors globally, with IT and freelance exports exceeding approximately US$3 billion annually. The country also hosts an expanding fintech and branchless banking ecosystem, with nearly 110–120 million branchless banking wallets, although active usage rates remain lower. Government-led initiatives related to digital identity systems, e-governance services, AI policy frameworks, fintech regulation, and startup facilitation have accelerated institutional modernization and citizen access to digital services. Between May 2025 and May 2026, Pakistan engaged with major global digital platforms through more than 15,000 reported requests related to online content management, cybersecurity coordination, hate speech mitigation, and the prevention of misinformation, reflecting broader efforts to strengthen responsible digital governance and online safety frameworks.

The report's economic freedom assessment reflects Pakistan's broader economic transition and stabilization process. The economy has faced substantial external and domestic pressures, including inflationary cycles, energy sector adjustments, exchange rate volatility, and fiscal consolidation requirements. Nevertheless, Pakistan continues to demonstrate resilience through SME activity, digital entrepreneurship, startup growth, remittance inflows, and financial inclusion expansion. SMEs currently account for approximately 90% of businesses and employ nearly 80% of the non-agricultural labor force. Pakistan's labor force is estimated between 71–75 million people, although labor participation disparities remain significant. Male Labor Force Participation Rate (LFPR) remains approximately 65–68%, while female LFPR stands between 20–25%, reflecting persistent structural barriers related to mobility, safety, social norms, workplace access, and economic inclusion.

Public perceptions regarding economic freedom reveal both optimism and concern. Approximately 58% of respondents expressed concerns regarding financial security and empowerment, while 48% remained skeptical regarding upward economic mobility. However, strong confidence was observed regarding occupational choice, entrepreneurship, and business operations. The report notes that these perceptions reflect both the economic pressures of recent years and the continuing aspirations associated with Pakistan's growing digital and entrepreneurial economy.

The gender inclusion chapter highlights measurable improvements in women's education, public visibility,

digital access, entrepreneurship, and representation. National primary school enrollment has reached approximately 69%, while tertiary enrollment remains near 13%. Women continue to increase participation across media, academia, business, healthcare, entrepreneurship, and public administration. However, gaps remain in workforce participation, digital access, inheritance implementation, and leadership representation. Women currently occupy approximately 9–10% of federal cabinet positions, while provincial representation varies across regions. Survey findings nonetheless indicate strong public support for women's inclusion and opportunity expansion.

The report also evaluates public trust and institutional confidence. Approximately 35% of respondents expressed optimism regarding Pakistan's future direction, while around 48% remained cautious or skeptical regarding governance and economic outcomes. Institutional confidence was comparatively stronger toward institutions associated with national stability, emergency coordination, and disaster response. The report notes that evolving public expectations, digital exposure, and economic pressures continue to shape citizen perceptions of governance effectiveness and institutional responsiveness.

Sectoral assessments further highlight Pakistan's growing academic ecosystem, entrepreneurial innovation, and civil society engagement. Pakistan hosts one of the region's largest higher education systems, with expanding university enrollment and digital learning platforms. Civil society organizations continue to play important roles in humanitarian assistance, community resilience, education, health, and policy advocacy. Meanwhile, Pakistan's startup ecosystem, despite investment slowdowns globally, continues to generate innovation potential, particularly within fintech, e-commerce, agritech, logistics, and AI-enabled services.

The report concludes by evaluating emerging risks likely to shape Pakistan's future governance and freedom trajectory. These include climate change, cybersecurity threats, misinformation ecosystems, water stress, urbanization pressures, youth unemployment, economic inequality, and technological disruption. Pakistan remains among the countries most vulnerable to climate-related shocks, including floods and heatwaves. The devastating 2022 floods affected over 33 million people, reinforcing the growing relationship between climate resilience, governance capacity, economic security, and human development.

The report ultimately concludes that Pakistan possesses significant constitutional foundations, institutional resilience, demographic strength, digital momentum, entrepreneurial capacity, and strategic relevance. Over recent years, substantial efforts have been undertaken to modernize governance systems, expand digital infrastructure, improve public service delivery, strengthen economic facilitation, and enhance social inclusion frameworks. While governance and implementation challenges remain, the broader trajectory reflects an ongoing process of institutional evolution and democratic consolidation.

Freedom, in this report, is therefore presented not as a static condition, but as a continuous process of governance modernization, institutional strengthening, citizen empowerment, economic inclusion, and national resilience. Pakistan's long-term progress will depend upon its continued ability to translate constitutional guarantees, reform initiatives, digital transformation, and governance commitments into measurable improvements in citizen experience, public trust, institutional performance, and inclusive national development.

Key Findings at a Glance

Chapter 1: Why Freedom Matters

» Pakistan's constitutional framework guarantees freedoms relating to speech, religion, association, movement, due process, political participation, and access to justice.

» With a population exceeding 240 million people, Pakistan is among the world's largest democracies and one of the fastest-growing digitally connected societies in South Asia.

» Approximately 65-70% of Pakistan's population is below the age of 30, making youth aspirations, digital participation, employment opportunities, and governance responsiveness increasingly central to the national freedom landscape.

» Pakistan's rapidly expanding digital ecosystem, urbanization trends, and economic modernization efforts are reshaping how citizens experience freedom, governance, and participation.

» The report identifies freedom as a multidimensional concept increasingly linked with economic opportunity, institutional fairness, security, digital access, inclusion, and public trust.

Chapter 2: Demographic and Survey Profile

» The National Freedom Perception Survey covered 2,000 respondents across Karachi, Lahore, Quetta, Islamabad/Rawalpindi, Faisalabad, Multan, and Peshawar.

» The survey represented urban and rural populations, professionals, entrepreneurs, labor communities, women, students, and economically active citizens.

» The respondent pool was highly educated:

- 67% held graduate degrees
- 32% possessed Master's qualifications
- 1% held doctoral qualifications

» Employment status reflected a broad cross-section of economically active citizens:

- 30% self-employed
- 29% private sector employees
- 13% public sector employees
- 11% students
- 5% unemployed
- 3% retired

» The survey indicates that Pakistan's emerging middle-class, entrepreneurial, and digitally connected populations are increasingly shaping governance expectations and public discourse.

Chapter 3: Political Freedom

Electoral and Democratic Participation

» Pakistan's 2024 General Elections involved:

- 128.5 million registered voters
- 92,353 polling stations
- More than 1.4 million election personnel

» National voter turnout stood at approximately 48%.

» Parliamentary representation in the National Assembly includes:
- 336 total seats
- 60 reserved seats for women
- 10 reserved seats for minorities

» Independent candidates secured approximately 93 seats, followed by:
- PML-N: ~75 seats
- PPP: ~54 seats

» Women's representation in Parliament stands at approximately 20% following reserved seat allocations.

Constitutional protections for religion and gender inclusion are heavily felt in practice. Conversely, the public discourse around free speech and unbiased information remains restricted, revealing a selective experience of social liberty.

THE HIGHS

POSITIVE
65%
Freedom of Religion

POSITIVE
~75%
Women's Opportunities

THE LOWS

EXPRESS CONCERNS
62%
Freedom of Speech

EXPRESS RESERVATIONS
55%
Access to Unbiased Information

Chapter 4: Civil Liberties

Information Access and Religious Infrastructure

» Digital platforms dominate public information consumption:
- Facebook: 24.8%
- WhatsApp: 19.9%
- Internet/Websites: 18%
- X/Twitter: 15%
- Television: 15%

» The country's media landscape includes:
- Over 100 television channels
- Hundreds of newspapers and digital outlets
- Rapidly expanding online media ecosystems.

» Traditional print media, radio, and interpersonal information networks now play a comparatively limited role among urban and educated respondents.

» Universities, think tanks, policy forums, and civil society organizations continue contributing toward intellectual engagement and public discourse.

» Pakistan's religious infrastructure includes:

- 600,000+ mosques
- 36,000+ madrassas
- 1,500–2,000 churches
- 350–400 Hindu temples

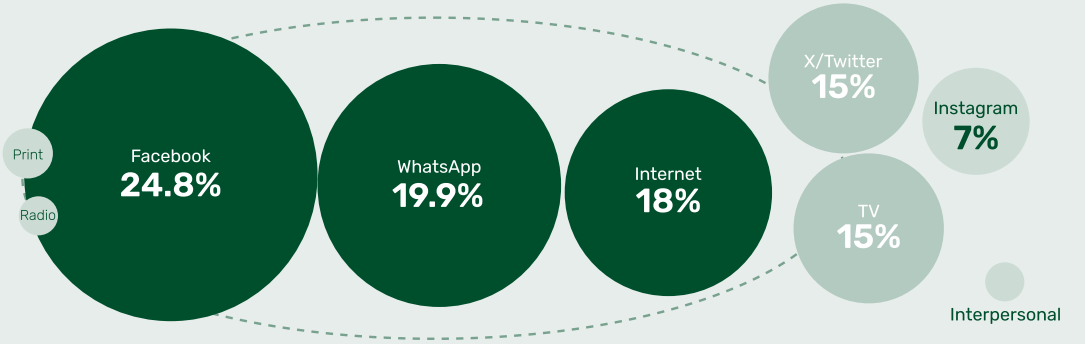
» In 2024, approximately 344 blasphemy-related accusations were reported:
- 62% in Punjab
- 30% in Sindh

» Composition of accused individuals included:
- 242 Muslims
- 49 Ahmadis
- 32 Hindus
- 20 Christians

» The Punjab Information Commission resolved approximately 3,800 RTI cases with an estimated 80–85% resolution rate.

The Information Ecosystem

Digital dominance drives public perception. Social platforms have eclipsed traditional broadcast and print as the primary lens through which citizens view governance and state affairs.



Chapter 5: Rule of Law and Justice

Judicial and Institutional Capacity

» Pakistan possesses an extensive constitutional, judicial, and legal framework aimed at protecting due process, legal rights, and institutional accountability.

» Parliamentary oversight systems, including the Public Accounts Committee chaired by opposition or independent representation, continue strengthening accountability mechanisms.

» Judicial modernization and digitization initiatives are gradually improving institutional efficiency and access to services.

» Institutional reforms continue focusing on accountability, administrative coordination, and governance effectiveness.

» Judicial pendency remains a major governance challenge:
- 59,191 cases pending in the Supreme Court
- 450,196 cases in High Courts
- 1,744,310 cases in District Judiciary

» Pakistan's prison population reached 102,026 inmates in 2024.

» Prison occupancy rates include:

- Punjab: 166.1%
- Sindh: 161.4%
- Balochistan: 115.6%

» Approximately 91,000 crimes against women were reported nationwide, including:
- 35,000 domestic violence cases
- 28,000 cyber harassment complaints.

The Synthesis Scorecard

Economic agency and religious/gender inclusivity lead national confidence, while speech,assembly, and financial stability lag significantly.

Occupational Choice 77%	Business Environment 75%	Women's Opportunities ~75%	Freedom of Religion 65%
Property Rights 45% positive vs 35% negative	Equality of Citizens 45% reservations vs 36% positive	Market Competition	

Chapter 6: Digital Freedom

Connectivity and Digital Governance

» Pakistan is now one of the region's largest digitally connected societies with:
- 190+ million cellular subscriptions
- 140–150 million broadband users
- 70 million active social media users
- More than 110 million internet users

» Pakistan's digital economy continues expanding rapidly through:
- E-commerce
- Digital banking
- Freelancing
- IT exports
- Mobile payment systems
- Online entrepreneurship.

» Digital access is increasingly viewed by citizens as an essential component of modern freedom, economic participation, and opportunity.

» National fiber backbone infrastructure exceeds 230,000 kilometers.

» International submarine cable capacity reached 17.21 Tbps.

» Between May 2025 and May 2026:
- 15,391 digital accounts cases were reported to global platforms
- 7,036 accounts (45.84%) were actioned

» Platform compliance rates included:
- Telegram: 72.52%
- YouTube: 15.09%

- X/Twitter: 15.32%.

» Pakistan ranks among the world's leading freelance economies, supported by a large youth population and growing technology sector.

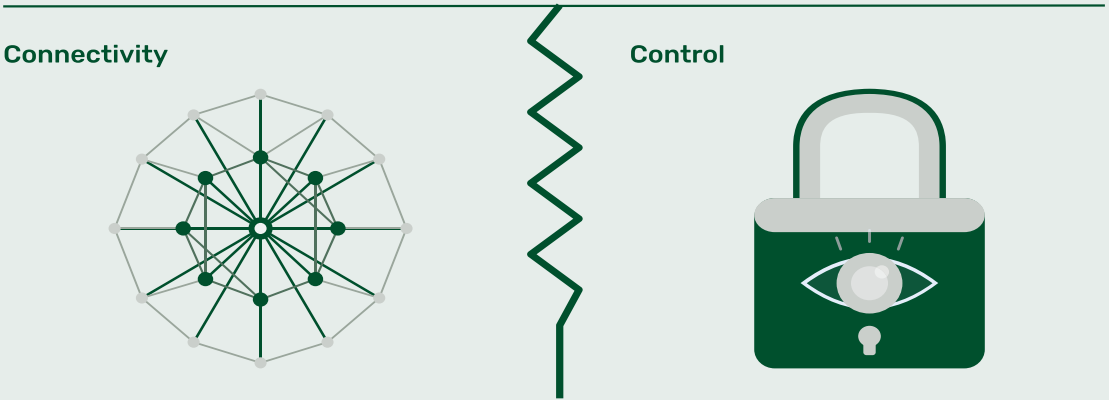
» Social media and digital platforms now shape governance discourse, political engagement, business activity, and public awareness to an unprecedented extent.

» Government efforts continue focusing on:

- Cybersecurity
- Digital governance reforms
- Responsible online engagement
- Platform regulation
- Expansion of connectivity and e-governance services.

The Digital Paradox

Digital spaces have become the primary arena for civic participation. Yet, citizens express high uncertainty regarding institutional protections, online harassment, and arbitrary disruptions, creating a deeply complex perception of digital rights.



Chapter 7: Economic Freedom

Employment, Informality, and Financial Inclusion

» Pakistan's labor force is estimated between 71–75 million people.

» Significant gender disparity persists in labor participation:

- Male Labour Force Perception Rate (LFPR): 65–68%
- Female Labour Force Perception Rate LFPR: 20–25%

» The informal economy accounts for approximately 70–75% of total employment.

» Pakistan has approximately 110–120 million branchless banking wallets, though only about half remain actively used.

» IT and freelance exports now exceed $3 billion annually, reflecting the rise of Pakistan's digital economy.

» Economic opportunity, entrepreneurship, affordability, and financial inclusion strongly influence public perceptions regarding governance and freedom.

» Pakistan's economy continues undergoing reforms in:

- Taxation systems
- Digital payments
- Financial inclusion
- Energy governance
- Institutional modernization.

» Pakistan's expanding technology sector and digital services economy are creating new opportunities for

youth employment, innovation, and remote work.

» Citizens increasingly associate economic freedom with:
  - Job creation
  - Predictable policies
  - Reduced inflationary pressures
  - Business growth
  - Upward mobility.

Citizens feel highly autonomous in choosing their professional paths and operating businesses. However,inflation, employment uncertainty, and structural barriers severely limit their perception of long-term financial security and upward mobility.

The Enablers

Occupational Choice
77%
positive

Business Environment
75%
positive, minimal undue interference

The Anxieties

Financial Empowerment & Security
58%
express concerns

Economic Mobility
48%
express reservations

Chapter 8: Gender and Freedom

Inclusion and Representation

» National primary enrollment stands at approximately 69%, while tertiary enrollment drops to 13%.

» Secondary school dropout rates remain near 31%.

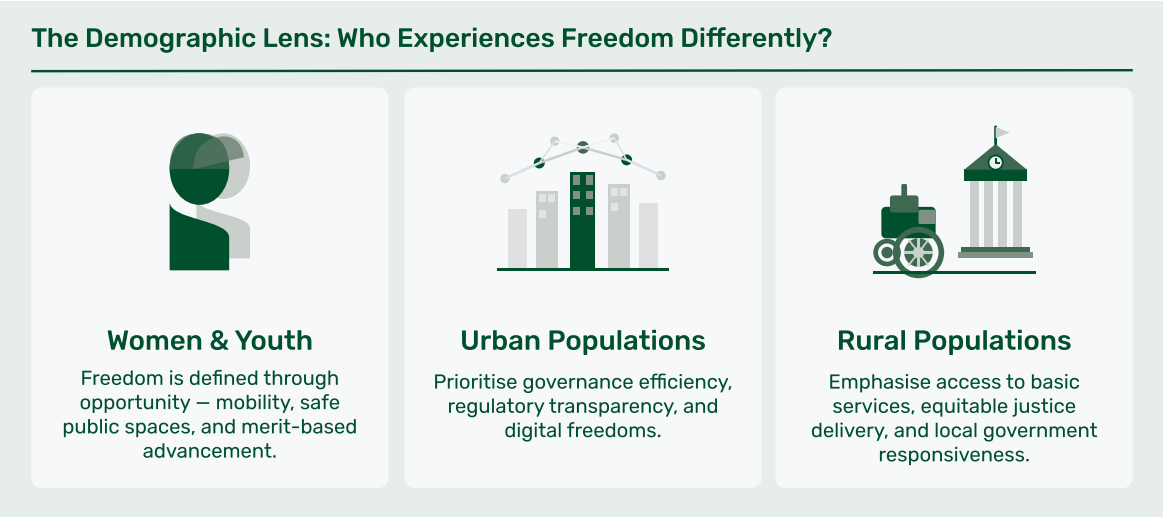
» Women are:
  - 20% less likely to own a mobile phone
  - Face a 40-percentage-point gap in social media usage compared to men.

» Women hold:
  - Approximately 9–10% of federal cabinet positions
  - Between 4–11% of provincial cabinet positions.

» Pakistan continues expanding legal protections and institutional support systems for women and vulnerable populations.

» Dedicated women police stations, helplines, protection centers, and the Zainab Alert Response and Recovery Authority (ZARRA) continue strengthening support mechanisms.

» Greater gender inclusion is increasingly viewed as a governance, economic, and social development priority.
  - Policy frameworks continue focusing on:
  - Women's workplace participation
  - Protection from violence
  - Access to justice
  - Financial inclusion
  - Educational access.



Chapter 9: Regional and Comparative Analysis

Global Positioning

» Pakistan's governance environment reflects many of the broader structural and developmental dynamics experienced across emerging economies.

» The country's federal structure, strategic geopolitical position, demographic scale, and security environment create unique governance challenges and opportunities.

» Pakistan continues to undertake institutional reforms aimed at improving:

- Economic competitiveness
- Governance efficiency
- Digital modernization
- Public service delivery.

» Urban populations generally experience greater access to:

- Digital infrastructure
- Economic opportunity
- Public services
- Information ecosystems.

» Comparative analysis highlights the importance of balancing democratic continuity, institutional stability, security considerations, and economic modernization.

Chapter 10: Public Perception and Trust

Citizen Sentiment and Institutional Confidence

» The National Freedom Perception Survey covered 2,000 respondents across Karachi, Lahore, Quetta, Islamabad/Rawalpindi, Faisalabad, Multan, and Peshawar, representing urban and rural populations, professionals, entrepreneurs, students, women, labor communities, and economically active groups.

» The respondent pool reflected a highly educated demographic:

- 67% graduate degree holders
- 32% Master's degree holders
- 1% doctoral qualifications.

» Employment distribution reflected a predominantly economically active sample:

- 30% self-employed
- 29% private sector employees
- 13% public sector employees

    - 11% students
    - 5% unemployed
    - 3% retired.
- Approximately 62% of citizens believe they possess limited influence over governance and policymaking processes.
- 35% of respondents expressed optimism regarding the country's direction.
- 48% remained skeptical about national progress and governance outcomes.
- 77% of respondents believe citizens are free to choose their occupation and career paths, making it the highest-rated freedom indicator in the survey.
- 75% believe women now enjoy increasing opportunities and access to education, employment, and participation in public life.
- 75% also perceive that businesses can largely operate without undue government interference, reflecting confidence in ongoing economic facilitation and regulatory reforms.
- 65% of respondents expressed positive views regarding freedom of religion and the protection of religious practices.
- 45% believe equality across gender, ethnicity, and religion is improving, though perceptions remain mixed regarding practical implementation.
- 45% positively rated the protection of property rights, indicating moderate confidence in judicial and land administration systems.
- 44% expressed favorable perceptions regarding the operational environment of civil society organizations.
- 37% believe political parties can operate effectively within the existing democratic and regulatory framework.
- 34% perceive market competition as reasonably fair, though many respondents seek stronger regulatory oversight and transparency.
- 31% believe upward economic mobility is achievable, highlighting continued public concerns regarding inflation, employment opportunities, and income growth.
- 31% expressed confidence in access to unbiased information despite reservations regarding media polarization and information credibility.
- Only 25% reported feeling financially empowered and economically secure, making economic anxiety one of the survey's strongest concerns.
- 20% positively rated respect for protest and assembly rights, reflecting the ongoing balance between constitutional freedoms and public order management.
- 11% expressed strong confidence in freedom of speech protections, indicating a significant public desire for greater openness, trust, and institutional reassurance regarding expression and dialogue.
- Survey findings indicated that respondents increasingly associate freedom with:
    - Economic opportunity
    - Institutional fairness
    - Security
    - Governance responsiveness
    - Access to services
    - Digital participation.
- On perceptions regarding the government's long-term vision:
    - 52% of respondents selected neutral-to-positive responses
    - 48% expressed skepticism or concern
- Respondents demonstrated relatively stronger confidence in institutions associated with:
    - National stability

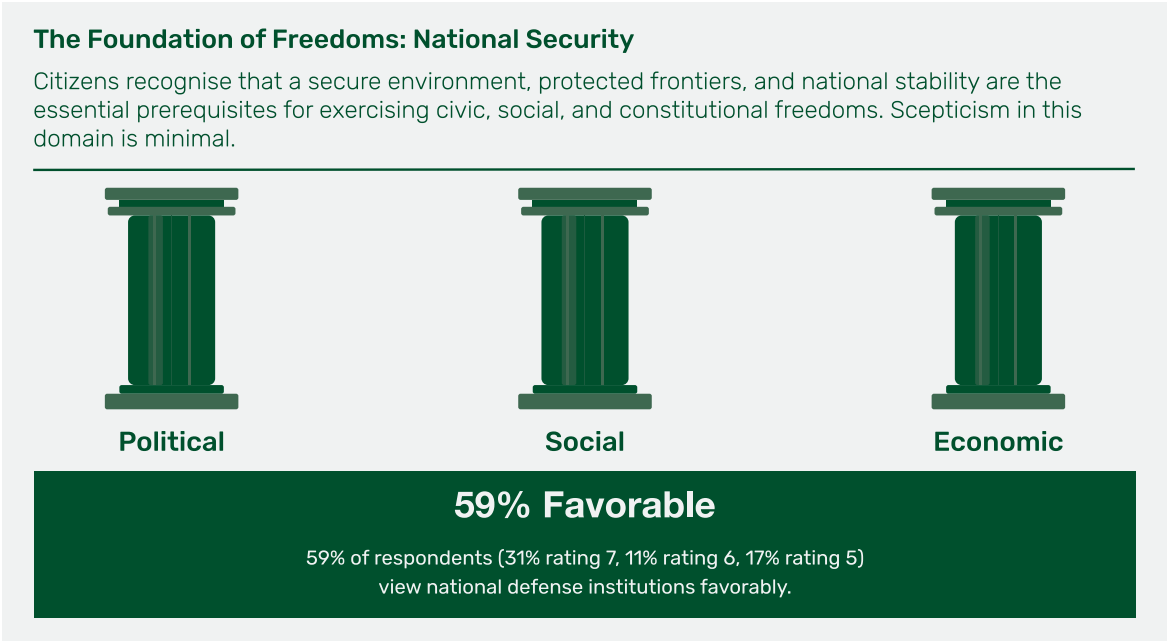
- Security
- Institutional continuity.

» Public sentiment regarding national defense institutions reflected comparatively positive perceptions:
- 59% selected positive responses
- 23% remained neutral
- 18% expressed negative perceptions.

» On the definition of “long term” governance:
- 69% of respondents viewed “more than five years” as representing a genuine long-term vision.

» Citizens increasingly evaluate governance performance through:
- Service delivery
- Affordability
- Economic stability
- Transparency
- Institutional responsiveness
- Administrative efficiency.

» Younger and digitally connected respondents demonstrated particularly strong expectations regarding:
- Meritocracy
- Digital freedoms
- Institutional modernization
- Entrepreneurship
- Economic mobility
- Governance transparency.



» Overall, the findings indicate that public trust in Pakistan remains closely linked with visible governance performance, economic opportunity, policy consistency, institutional fairness, and the ability of state institutions to translate reforms into measurable citizen outcomes.

Chapter 11: Sectoral Deep Dives

Media, Entrepreneurship, and Innovation

» Pakistan's media ecosystem includes:
  - 120+ licensed satellite television channels
  - Hundreds of FM radio stations nationwide.
  - Thousands of digital media pages, online platforms, and independent content creators.
» Social media penetration now exceeds 70 million active users, significantly transforming journalism, public discourse, and information dissemination.
» Pakistan's higher education landscape includes:
  - More than 240 recognized universities and degree-awarding institutions
  - Millions of enrolled students across public and private sector institutions.
» The country's civil society sector includes thousands of registered non-governmental organizations, foundations, advocacy groups, humanitarian networks, and welfare institutions operating in:
  - Education
  - Healthcare
  - Human rights
  - Disaster relief
  - Community development
  - Women empowerment.
» SMEs account for:
  - 90% of businesses
  - 80% of the non-agricultural labor force
» Startup investment inflows declined from:
  - $350–370 million in 2022
  - To approximately $50–60 million in 2024.
» Religious and cultural institutions remain deeply embedded within Pakistan's social fabric through:
» Pakistan's religious infrastructure includes:
  - 600,000+ mosques
  - 36,000+ madrassas
  - 1,500–2,000 churches
  - 350–400 Hindu temples
» Pakistan's creative and cultural industries continue expanding through:
  - Film
  - Television
  - Digital content
  - Sports
  - Tourism
  - Music
  - Online entertainment sectors.

Chapter 12: Risk Outlook and Emerging Challenges

Climate and Systemic Vulnerability

» The catastrophic 2022 floods affected over 33 million people, exposing the intersection between climate vulnerability, infrastructure resilience, economic security, and human freedom.
» Climate risks continue to shape long-term governance, migration, food security, and economic resilience

planning.

» Rapid digitalization has created new governance challenges associated with:
  - Cybersecurity
  - Data protection
  - Artificial intelligence
  - Online misinformation
  - Platform governance.

» Pakistan's internet user base exceeding 110 million individuals significantly increases the scale and complexity of digital governance and cyber regulation challenges.

» Geopolitical tensions, regional instability, global inflationary pressures, and supply chain disruptions continue affecting:
  - Economic stability
  - Energy markets
  - Food security
  - Investment confidence.

» Population growth, urbanization, and youth unemployment continue increasing pressure on:
  - Infrastructure
  - Education systems
  - Labor markets
  - Public services
  - Urban governance capacity.

» Climate change, digital transformation, and demographic pressures are increasingly recognized as long-term strategic governance challenges requiring adaptive policymaking and institutional coordination.

Chapter 13: Policy Recommendations

Institutional Modernization

» The report proposes the creation of an Annual Freedom Tracker, utilizing a standardized 0–100 framework to measure:
  - Political freedoms
  - Economic freedoms

Policy Intelligence: The Path Forward

1 Prioritize Reliability Over Promises
Public confidence increases with transparent, impartial procedures. Citizens do not just seek rights; they seek institutions that consistently work.

2 Address the Justice Gap
Unequal access to legal representation, delays, and perceptions of selective accountability remain the system's most critical vulnerabilities.

3 Transform Policy into Lived Reality
Perception data is the ultimate test of legitimacy. Reform communication must target Speech, Assembly, and Financial Security — where gaps actively persist.

- Digital freedoms
- Social freedoms
- Legal protections
- Institutional performance.

» The framework aims to support evidence-based policymaking, institutional benchmarking, and long-term governance monitoring.

Chapter 14: Toward a More Open, Secure, and Prosperous Pakistan

From Constitutional Promise to Lived Reality

» Pakistan's population exceeding 240 million people, combined with one of the world's youngest demographic profiles, represents both a major governance challenge and a significant economic opportunity.

» The report concludes that Pakistan's future progress depends upon its ability to consistently translate constitutional frameworks, institutional reforms, and governance initiatives into measurable citizen outcomes, sustainable economic growth, and inclusive national development.

» The report concludes that freedom must increasingly transition from a constitutional guarantee toward a measurable lived citizen experience.

» Approximately 69% of respondents defined a "long-term national vision" as a strategy extending beyond five years, highlighting growing public demand for policy continuity, institutional stability, and sustainable governance reforms.

» The report identifies:

- Institutional effectiveness
- Governance continuity
- Economic modernization
- Public trust
- Citizen inclusion
- Policy predictability as central pillars for long-term national resilience and prosperity.

» Pakistan's evolving governance trajectory reflects increasing emphasis on:

- Transparency
- Evidence-based policymaking
- Digital transformation
- Inclusive development
- Institutional modernization.



Chapter 1:

Introduction – Why Freedom Matters

Freedom is not an abstract philosophical ideal; it is a measurable condition of governance, institutional behavior, and citizen experience. It shapes how individuals participate in public life, how businesses invest, how media operates, how courts function, and how states are perceived globally. For a country navigating democratic evolution, economic transition, technological disruption, and geopolitical complexity, freedom becomes both a developmental asset and a governance benchmark.

Pakistan stands at an inflection point. Over the past decade, the country has undertaken institutional reforms, expanded digital connectivity, strengthened regulatory frameworks, and recalibrated economic management structures. Yet the question remains: how do citizens experience freedom in their daily lives? How do institutions safeguard constitutional guarantees? How does Pakistan compare regionally and globally? And how can freedom be measured not rhetorically, but systematically?

This report begins from a simple premise: freedom must be documented, measured, and contextualized through indigenous data and institutional analysis. External indices often shape international perceptions, but they may not fully capture contextual realities, reform trajectories, or structural constraints. A national assessment provides an opportunity to calibrate narrative with evidence, grounded in constitutional provisions, administrative performance, regulatory frameworks, and citizen perception.

Freedom as a Constitutional Commitment

The Constitution of Pakistan (1973) enshrines fundamental rights including freedom of speech, association, religion, movement, and due process. These rights form the normative foundation of the Republic. However, constitutional guarantees acquire meaning only through implementation, through courts, parliaments, regulatory bodies, provincial administrations, and law enforcement agencies.

Freedom therefore operates at two levels:

» Normative Freedom – What the Constitution guarantees.

» Operational Freedom – How institutions enable or constrain those guarantees in practice.

The gap between these two dimensions defines the policy space for reform.

The Expanding Scope of Freedom

Traditional assessments focus primarily on political rights and civil liberties. However, contemporary governance requires a broader lens. Freedom today encompasses:

» Political Freedom – Electoral integrity, pluralism, and participatory governance

» Civil Liberties – Expression, association, religion, academic independence

» Rule of Law – Judicial autonomy, due process, enforcement integrity

» Digital Freedom – Online expression, data privacy, access to the internet

» Economic Freedom – Property rights, regulatory efficiency, market access

» Inclusive Freedom – Gender equality and minority protections

In a digitally connected and demographically young society, digital and economic freedoms increasingly shape citiz en experience as much as traditional civil liberties.

Balancing Freedom and Security

Every state must balance liberty with security. Counterterrorism measures, public order regulations, cyber governance frameworks, and emergency provisions are often justified through security imperatives. The central policy challenge is proportionality: ensuring that regulatory or security measures do not create structural constraints that outlast the risks they were designed to mitigate.

Pakistan's security environment has historically influenced its governance architecture. As stability improves, the recalibration of this balance becomes a strategic policy conversation.

Perception vs. Institutional Reality

Freedom is both measurable and perceptual. Institutional reforms may strengthen formal protections, yet public trust may lag. Conversely, public confidence may remain stable despite structural weaknesses. This report therefore integrates two analytical layers:

» Objective Institutional Indicators

» National Perception Survey Findings

This dual approach ensures that institutional architecture and citizen sentiment are examined together.

Why This Report Matters Now

Three structural transformations make this assessment particularly timely in Pakistan's current trajectory.

First, digital acceleration is redefining the meaning and scope of freedom. Over the past decade, Pakistan has witnessed rapid growth in internet penetration, mobile connectivity, e-commerce platforms, digital payments, and social media usage. Governance functions, from taxation and licensing to public service delivery, are increasingly digitized. At the same time, regulatory frameworks governing cybercrime, data protection, platform content, and online speech are evolving. This transformation introduces new dimensions of freedom: digital expression, online privacy, algorithmic transparency, and equitable access to digital infrastructure. Freedom is no longer confined to physical public space; it now operates within digital ecosystems shaped by both state regulation and private platforms. Measuring freedom today requires assessing how digital governance balances innovation, security, privacy, and open discourse.

Second, institutional reform momentum has intensified the need for structured evaluation. In recent years,

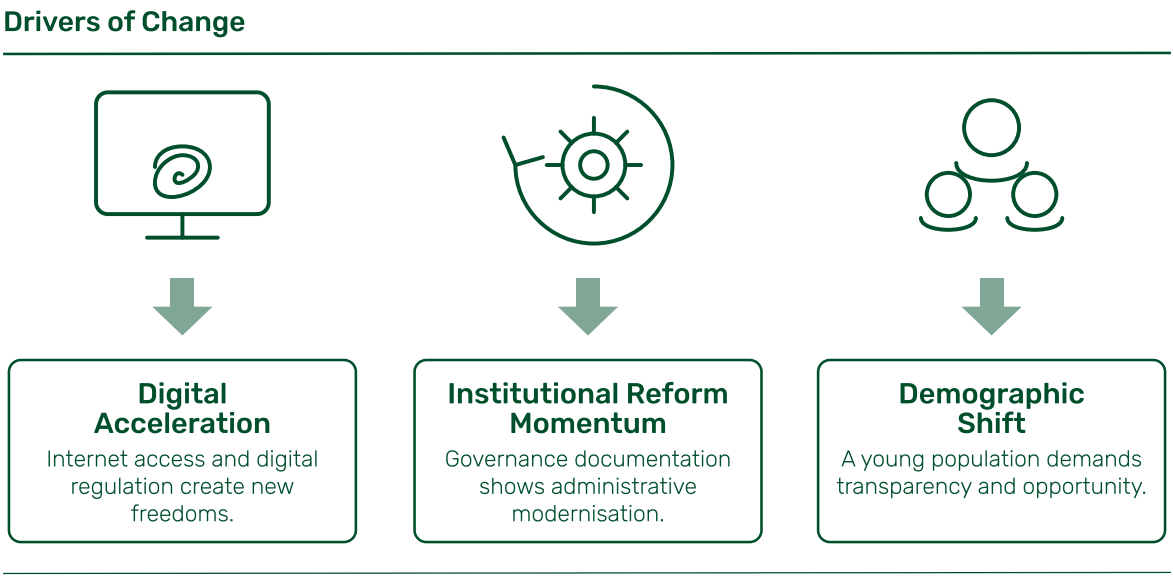


Figure: Drivers of Change, Freedom Report 2026

governance documentation initiatives, regulatory modernization efforts, and administrative digitization programs have gained prominence. Ministries and public institutions are increasingly focused on transparency, performance measurement, and service efficiency. Judicial reforms, right-to-information frameworks, and regulatory simplification initiatives reflect a broader recognition that institutional strength underpins national progress. However, reform narratives require systematic calibration. Without measurement frameworks, it is difficult to distinguish between incremental adjustments and structural transformation. Assessing freedom within this reform context allows policymakers to evaluate whether institutional changes are expanding or constraining operational liberties, and whether improvements are sustained across sectors and provinces.

Third, Pakistan's demographic shift makes the question of freedom more urgent. A predominantly young population, digitally connected, aspirational, and globally aware, places new expectations on governance. Youth demand mobility, meritocracy, economic opportunity, and transparent institutions. They engage politically through digital platforms, participate in entrepreneurial ventures, and increasingly evaluate state performance through comparative global benchmarks. This demographic reality alters the policy landscape. Freedom is no longer solely a constitutional matter; it is a developmental and generational imperative. If governance systems do not align with these expectations, trust gaps may widen. Conversely, responsive institutions can harness demographic potential as a driver of innovation and growth.

Taken together, these transformations underscore that freedom must be measured not as a static condition but as a dynamic system. Legal guarantees remain foundational, but their practical meaning evolves alongside technology, institutional reform, and citizen expectations. Regulatory frameworks adapt. Judicial interpretations shift. Public perception changes. Economic structures transform. Freedom is therefore best understood as an ongoing interaction between state authority, institutional capacity, and societal demand. This report adopts that dynamic lens, treating freedom as a living governance variable responsive to reform, regulatory evolution, and the aspirations of Pakistan's citizens.

1.1 Defining Freedom in the Pakistani Context

Freedom in Pakistan must be understood through a layered and contextual lens, constitutional, institutional, historical, social, and economic. It is neither an abstract philosophical import nor a concept detached from lived realities. Rather, it is embedded in the country's constitutional architecture, shaped by its political evolution, influenced by its security environment, and increasingly transformed by digital and economic transitions.

At its foundation, freedom in Pakistan is anchored in the Constitution of 1973, which guarantees fundamental rights including freedom of speech and expression, freedom of association, freedom of religion, freedom of movement, equality before law, and due process. These guarantees establish the normative commitment of the state to protect civil and political liberties. However, constitutional text alone does not define the full meaning of freedom. The operationalization of these rights, through legislation, judicial interpretation, administrative practice, and enforcement mechanisms, determines how freedom functions in everyday life.

In the Pakistani context, freedom is closely intertwined with institutional capacity. A right exists in principle, but its accessibility depends on the efficiency and independence of institutions. For example, freedom of

expression depends not only on constitutional protection but also on regulatory clarity, media autonomy, judicial recourse, and digital governance frameworks. Similarly, economic freedom depends on property rights enforcement, regulatory transparency, dispute resolution mechanisms, and access to finance. Thus, freedom in Pakistan must be viewed as an ecosystem rather than an isolated entitlement.

Historical experience also shapes the understanding of freedom. Periods of constitutional suspension, emergency governance, and security-driven policy measures have influenced the evolution of civil liberties and institutional balance. At the same time, democratic transitions, judicial activism, devolution under the 18th Amendment, and expansion of media and digital platforms have expanded participatory space. The Pakistani experience demonstrates that freedom is dynamic, subject to expansion, recalibration, and institutional negotiation.

Security considerations remain a defining feature of the national governance landscape. Counterterrorism measures, public order regulations, and cyber governance policies are often framed within national security imperatives. In such contexts, freedom must be assessed in terms of proportionality and oversight. The critical policy question is not whether the state may regulate, but how it regulates, under what safeguards, and with what mechanisms of accountability. Freedom in Pakistan therefore involves balancing liberty with stability in a manner consistent with constitutional guarantees.

Socio-economic realities further complicate the definition of freedom. High levels of informality, regional disparities, gender gaps, and unequal access to digital infrastructure affect how freedoms are experienced. Legal equality does not automatically translate into substantive equality. A woman in a rural district, a small entrepreneur navigating regulatory hurdles, or a youth dependent on digital platforms may encounter structural constraints that differ significantly from formal legal protections. Consequently, defining freedom in Pakistan requires attention to inclusivity and accessibility.

Digital transformation has added a new dimension to the concept. Internet access, data privacy, platform governance, and online expression now shape civic participation and economic opportunity. Digital freedom is no longer peripheral; it is central to contemporary citizenship. As regulatory frameworks evolve, the balance between safeguarding online spaces and preserving open digital discourse becomes a defining governance challenge.

Finally, freedom in Pakistan must be interpreted within its federal structure. Provincial autonomy following constitutional devolution has altered governance dynamics. Many freedoms, particularly those relating to local governance, education, health, and policing, are experienced differently across provinces and territories. A national assessment must therefore recognize regional variation rather than assume uniform conditions.

Freedom in the Pakistani context is best defined as the practical ability of individuals and communities to exercise constitutionally guaranteed rights within a functioning institutional framework that ensures accountability, proportional regulation, equal access, and judicial recourse. It is a condition shaped by governance quality, economic structure, digital evolution, and social inclusion. Measuring it requires not only legal analysis, but institutional diagnostics and citizen perception.

This report adopts that comprehensive definition, treating freedom not as a binary label, but as a spectrum influenced by policy choices, administrative capacity, and public trust.

1.2 Rights and Freedoms: Distinction, Interpretation, and Interconnection

The terms freedoms and rights are often used interchangeably, yet they carry distinct meanings in constitutional and governance discourse. A right is a legally recognized entitlement protected by law and enforceable through institutions. A freedom, by contrast, refers to the space within which an individual can act without undue interference. Rights are codified; freedoms are exercised. Rights are guaranteed by the state; freedoms are experienced by citizens. The distinction matters because a country may formally guarantee rights, yet the practical exercise of freedoms may vary depending on institutional behavior and social conditions.

For example, the Constitution of Pakistan guarantees the right to freedom of speech. This right establishes a legal shield protecting citizens from arbitrary censorship. However, freedom of expression is the lived condition in which journalists, academics, entrepreneurs, and ordinary citizens can speak, publish, and debate without fear of disproportionate restriction. The right is the legal foundation; the freedom is the operational reality. If courts are accessible, regulatory bodies act proportionately, and public discourse remains open, the right translates into meaningful freedom. If enforcement is inconsistent or opaque, the right may exist in law while freedom narrows in practice.

Similarly, consider property. The right to property provides constitutional protection against unlawful deprivation. Yet economic freedom depends on more than ownership. It requires efficient contract

enforcement, transparent regulations, fair taxation, and accessible dispute resolution. A business owner may legally possess property, but if licensing procedures are unpredictable or judicial cases are delayed for years, economic freedom becomes constrained despite the existence of rights. Thus, rights create entitlement; freedoms require functional institutions.

The relationship between rights and freedoms is therefore interdependent. Rights provide the legal architecture within which freedoms operate. Freedoms, in turn, give substance and meaning to rights. Without rights, freedoms lack protection. Without freedoms, rights remain symbolic. For instance, the right to assembly ensures that citizens can gather peacefully. But actual freedom of assembly depends on public order management, administrative facilitation, and proportional policing. When exercised responsibly and protected institutionally, the right strengthens democratic participation; when restricted arbitrarily, the freedom diminishes even if the constitutional text remains unchanged.

Another important distinction lies in scope. Rights often impose obligations on the state, such as ensuring due process or protecting minorities. Freedoms primarily limit state interference, requiring restraint and proportionality. Yet in modern governance, these boundaries overlap. Digital freedom illustrates this well. Citizens may have a right to privacy, but digital freedom also requires proactive data protection laws, cybersecurity safeguards, and oversight mechanisms. The state must both refrain from unlawful intrusion and actively construct protective frameworks.

In the Pakistani context, understanding this interconnection is crucial. Constitutional rights form the normative promise of the Republic. Institutional capacity determines whether freedoms flourish. Judicial independence strengthens both. Transparent regulation enhances economic freedom while safeguarding property rights. Inclusive policies bridge the gap between formal equality and substantive freedom for women and minorities.

Ultimately, rights define what citizens are entitled to; freedoms define how far they can meaningfully exercise those entitlements. A mature governance system does not treat them as competing concepts, but as complementary pillars. Where rights are clear, enforceable, and institutionally supported, freedoms expand. Where freedoms are protected and responsibly exercised, rights gain legitimacy and resilience.

Balancing Rights and Freedoms for a Mature Governance System

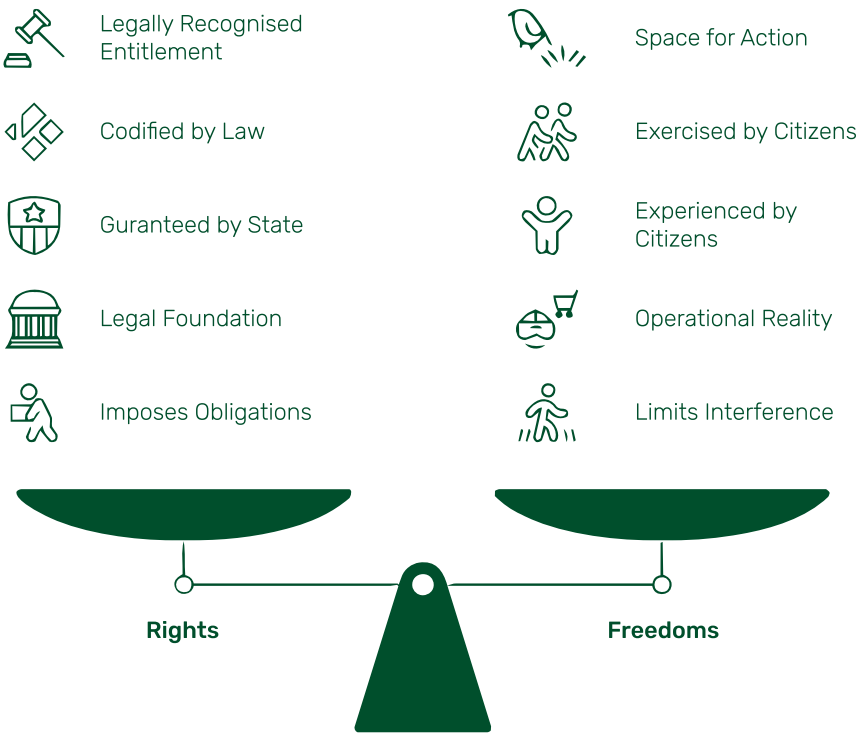


Figure: Balaancing Rights aand Freedoms for a Maure Governance System, Freedom Report 2026

1.3 Constitutional Foundations of Freedom (1973 Constitution)

The constitutional foundations of freedom in Pakistan are rooted in the Constitution of 1973, which serves as the supreme legal framework of the Islamic Republic. Unlike ordinary legislation, constitutional guarantees

are binding on all organs of the state, executive, legislature, and judiciary. The Constitution not only defines the structure of governance but also establishes a framework of fundamental rights that articulate the state's commitment to protecting civil, political, and legal freedoms. These provisions form the normative bedrock upon which institutional accountability and citizen autonomy rest.

Part II, Chapter 1 of the Constitution outlines the Fundamental Rights of citizens. These include, among others, the right to life and liberty, equality before law, safeguards as to arrest and detention, freedom of movement, freedom of assembly, freedom of association, freedom of speech and expression, freedom of religion, and the right to acquire, hold, and dispose of property. These rights collectively shape the constitutional understanding of freedom as both individual autonomy and protection against arbitrary state action. The Constitution also explicitly prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex and affirms equal protection of the law, thereby linking freedom to the principle of equality.

A distinctive feature of Pakistan's constitutional framework is that fundamental rights are enforceable through the superior judiciary. Articles 184(3) and 199 empower the Supreme Court and High Courts to exercise judicial review where fundamental rights are threatened or violated. This mechanism transforms constitutional freedoms from declaratory statements into justiciable entitlements. The judiciary, therefore, plays a central role in interpreting the scope of freedoms and ensuring their protection against executive or legislative overreach.

However, constitutional freedoms are not absolute. The Constitution permits "reasonable restrictions" in the interest of sovereignty, security, public order, decency, morality, and other defined grounds. For example, freedom of speech may be subject to limitations related to national security or public order. The presence of such clauses reflects a recognition that liberty must coexist with collective stability. The constitutional test lies in proportionality, ensuring that restrictions are lawful, necessary, and not excessive relative to the objective pursued. Judicial interpretation over time has shaped how these boundaries are applied.

The 18th Constitutional Amendment significantly strengthened federalism and provincial autonomy, influencing how freedoms are administered across regions. Devolution transferred substantial authority in areas such as education, health, and local governance to provincial governments. As a result, while rights remain constitutionally uniform, their operational realization may vary depending on provincial institutional capacity. This federal structure adds complexity to the assessment of freedom, requiring regional analysis within a unified constitutional framework.

The Objectives Resolution, incorporated into the Constitution as a substantive part, further articulates guiding principles including democracy, freedom, equality, tolerance, and social justice as enunciated by Islam. It reflects the ideological and moral underpinnings of the constitutional order. While interpretative debates continue regarding its scope, it reinforces the conceptual link between freedom, democratic governance, and social justice within Pakistan's constitutional identity.

Importantly, the Constitution provides procedural safeguards that underpin substantive freedoms. Due process, protection against retrospective punishment, safeguards against arbitrary arrest, and the right to fair trial collectively ensure that freedom is protected through legal mechanisms. Amendments over time have reinforced these protections, including explicit recognition of the right to fair trial and due process.

In essence, the 1973 Constitution establishes a comprehensive framework for freedom, anchored in enforceable rights, balanced by defined limitations, safeguarded through judicial oversight, and embedded within a federal structure. The constitutional architecture does not merely enumerate liberties; it constructs an institutional system designed to protect them. The effectiveness of these foundations, however, depends on institutional integrity, legislative prudence, and consistent judicial interpretation.

This report evaluates freedom in Pakistan through this constitutional lens, recognizing that all institutional assessments ultimately trace back to the guarantees, responsibilities, and safeguards enshrined in the supreme law of the land.

1.4 Freedom, Governance, and Economic Development

Freedom is not only a constitutional value; it is a structural component of effective governance and sustainable economic development. Countries that institutionalize civil liberties, protect property rights, uphold rule of law, and ensure regulatory transparency tend to build stronger economic systems and more resilient political institutions. In this sense, freedom functions as both a governance outcome and an economic input.

At the governance level, freedom enhances accountability. When citizens can express opinions, access information, organize collectively, and seek judicial recourse, public institutions operate under greater scrutiny. Transparency reduces corruption risks, improves policy implementation, and strengthens administrative performance. Freedom of the press, for example, plays a corrective role by highlighting inefficiencies or

governance gaps. Judicial independence ensures that executive authority remains within constitutional limits. Together, these mechanisms reinforce institutional trust, which is a prerequisite for policy continuity and long-term planning.

Economic development is closely linked to this institutional environment. Investors, both domestic and international, prioritize predictability. Predictability emerges from enforceable contracts, impartial courts, regulatory clarity, and protection of property rights. Economic freedom is therefore not synonymous with deregulation; it is about stable, transparent, and proportionate regulation. Where rules are clear and consistently applied, businesses can allocate capital with confidence. Where uncertainty prevails, investment slows, informality expands, and economic dynamism weakens.

Freedom also stimulates innovation. Open societies encourage debate, academic inquiry, technological experimentation, and entrepreneurial risk-taking. Freedom of expression supports knowledge exchange. Digital freedom expands access to markets and information. Academic freedom strengthens research capacity. In knowledge-driven economies, these freedoms directly influence productivity and competitiveness. For Pakistan, with a predominantly young population and growing digital penetration, the relationship between freedom and innovation is particularly significant.

Moreover, inclusive freedom has measurable economic implications. Gender equality in labor force participation, protection against discrimination, and access to finance for marginalized communities expand the productive base of the economy. When women and minorities can exercise economic rights without structural barriers, national output increases. Conversely, restrictions that limit participation reduce growth potential. Thus, freedom intersects with development not only through institutions but through inclusion.

Governance reform efforts in Pakistan increasingly recognize this interconnection. Regulatory simplification, digitalization of services, right-to-information frameworks, and judicial modernization initiatives all influence how freedoms are experienced. When citizens can register businesses online, access courts more efficiently, or obtain public services transparently, both governance quality and economic efficiency improve. These reforms illustrate that freedom is not an abstract ideal but a practical governance tool.

However, the relationship is not automatic. Freedom without institutional capacity can lead to policy fragmentation. Markets without regulatory oversight can produce instability. The objective is balance, ensuring that freedom operates within a framework of accountability and institutional strength. Effective governance provides the scaffolding within which freedoms expand responsibly, while freedom ensures that governance remains legitimate and responsive.

In the Pakistani context, where economic stabilization, fiscal reform, and structural transformation are ongoing priorities, strengthening freedoms can contribute to improved investor confidence, enhanced productivity, and social cohesion. Measuring freedom, therefore, is not an isolated exercise in civil liberties assessment; it is part of a broader evaluation of governance performance and development trajectory.

This report approaches freedom as an integrated component of national progress, recognizing that durable economic growth, institutional credibility, and citizen empowerment are mutually reinforcing.

1.5 Freedom and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice & Strong Institutions)

Freedom and institutional strength are inseparable from the global development agenda articulated in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Among the seventeen goals, SDG 16, Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions, most directly encapsulates the governance architecture necessary for the protection and expansion of freedoms. It recognizes that sustainable development cannot occur in environments where justice is inaccessible, institutions lack accountability, or civic space is constrained.

SDG 16 promotes peaceful and inclusive societies, access to justice for all, and effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels. Each of these elements intersects directly with the pillars of freedom assessed in this report. Peace relates to security and social cohesion, both of which influence the conditions under which freedoms are exercised. Justice connects to due process, judicial independence, and equality before law, core foundations of civil and political liberty. Strong institutions underpin transparency, anti-corruption frameworks, regulatory fairness, and public trust.

In the Pakistani context, SDG 16 provides an internationally recognized framework through which freedom can be operationalized and measured. Targets under SDG 16 include reducing corruption, ensuring responsive decision-making, strengthening access to information, protecting fundamental freedoms, and developing accountable institutions. These targets align closely with constitutional guarantees and governance reform initiatives undertaken at federal and provincial levels. By mapping freedom indicators against SDG 16 targets, this report situates national assessment within a globally comparable structure while retaining contextual nuance.

The relationship between freedom and peace is particularly significant. Societies where citizens can participate in political processes, access legal remedies, and express grievances peacefully are less prone to systemic instability. Inclusive governance reduces alienation and strengthens social trust. Conversely, when institutional channels for redress are weak, tensions may manifest in disruptive forms. Thus, strengthening freedoms contributes to conflict prevention and long-term stability.

Access to justice is another critical dimension. Legal rights have limited value without enforceability. Efficient courts, transparent procedures, and impartial adjudication ensure that freedoms are not merely symbolic. Reforms in case management, judicial digitization, legal aid, and alternative dispute resolution mechanisms enhance both institutional credibility and citizen confidence. In this regard, SDG 16 serves as a practical roadmap linking justice sector performance to broader freedom outcomes.

Transparency and anti-corruption measures also play a defining role. Freedom of information, open data policies, independent oversight bodies, and audit mechanisms strengthen governance integrity. When public institutions operate transparently, citizens are better positioned to exercise freedoms responsibly. Corruption erodes both economic freedom and public trust, making institutional integrity a prerequisite for meaningful liberty.

Furthermore, SDG 16 emphasizes inclusive decision-making. Participatory governance, through parliamentary oversight, local government empowerment, stakeholder consultation, and civic engagement, ensures that policies reflect diverse interests. This inclusivity enhances the legitimacy of regulatory frameworks and reduces the perception of arbitrary governance. Freedom thrives in environments where institutions are responsive rather than opaque.

For Pakistan, aligning freedom assessment with SDG 16 offers multiple advantages. It reinforces international comparability, strengthens policy coherence, and integrates governance reform with broader development planning. It also underscores that freedom is not a peripheral concern but a central pillar of sustainable growth and institutional modernization.

This report therefore treats SDG 16 not merely as a global commitment, but as an analytical anchor. By evaluating institutional effectiveness, justice delivery, transparency mechanisms, and protection of fundamental freedoms, the assessment contributes to understanding how Pakistan's governance trajectory aligns with internationally recognized development standards. In doing so, it affirms that freedom, peace, justice, and strong institutions are mutually reinforcing foundations of national progress.

1.6 Objectives of the State of Freedom Report

The first objective of this report is to establish a structured, evidence-based Freedom Guide for Pakistan. This means moving beyond general commentary or isolated statistics and instead building a coherent analytical framework that defines what freedom entails in Pakistan's constitutional, institutional, and socio-economic context. A structured guide ensures that freedom is measured systematically through clearly defined pillars, indicators, and scoring criteria. An evidence-based approach anchors the assessment in verifiable data—laws, regulations, institutional performance records, judicial decisions, administrative outputs, and nationally gathered survey findings, thereby enhancing credibility and policy relevance.

The report also seeks to benchmark institutional performance across pillars of freedom. Freedom is not merely a legal entitlement; it is operationalized through institutions, parliament, judiciary, regulatory authorities, provincial administrations, law enforcement agencies, and oversight bodies. Benchmarking evaluates how effectively these institutions enable or constrain freedoms within their respective mandates. By examining political, civil, digital, economic, and inclusive dimensions, the report identifies relative strengths and weaknesses across governance structures. This comparative assessment allows policymakers to understand where institutional capacity aligns with constitutional guarantees and where reform is required.

A central feature of the report is the integration of perception-based data with structural indicators. Institutional frameworks may appear robust on paper, yet public trust and lived experience may tell a different story. Conversely, perceptions may not always reflect structural improvements. By combining objective data, such as legislative provisions, regulatory actions, judicial caseload statistics, or access metrics, with survey findings on citizen sentiment, trust, and perceived autonomy, the report provides a dual-layered analysis. This integration ensures that freedom is examined not only as a legal and administrative construct but also as a social reality experienced by individuals and communities.

The identification of reform acceleration pathways is another core objective. Measurement without direction risks becoming descriptive rather than transformative. By analyzing gaps between normative guarantees and operational outcomes, the report highlights areas where targeted policy interventions can strengthen institutional performance. These pathways may include legislative amendments, procedural reforms, digital

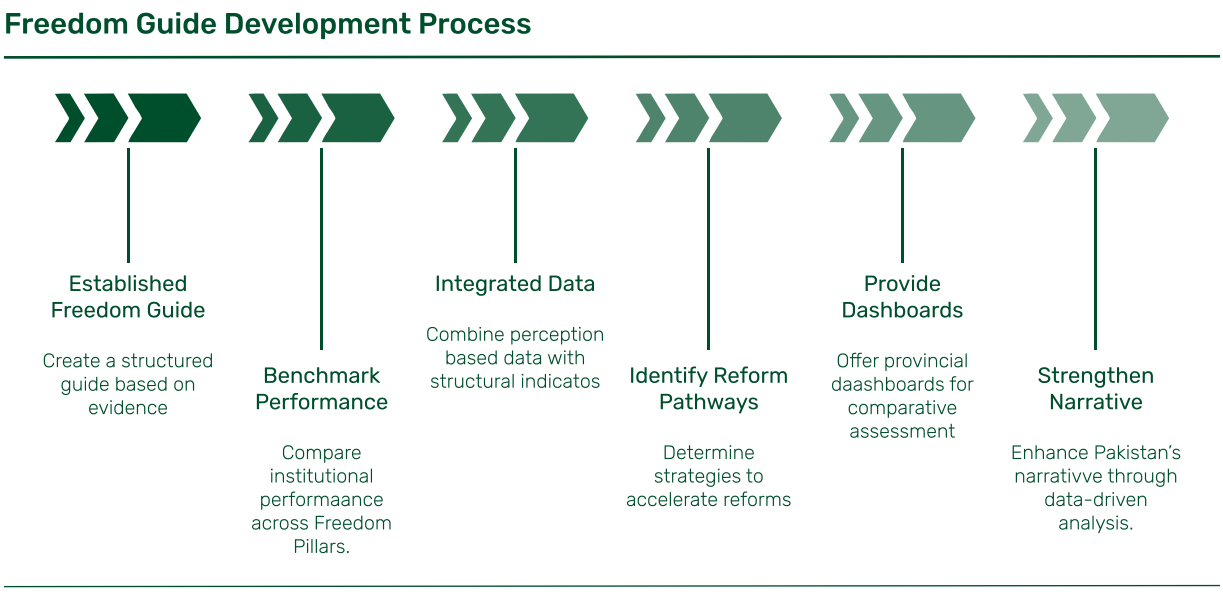


Figure: Freedom Guide Development Process, Freedom Report 2026

governance safeguards, capacity-building initiatives, or regulatory simplification. The emphasis is not on critique alone, but on actionable recommendations that enable incremental and sustained improvements.

Providing regional dashboards for comparative assessment further enhances the report's utility. Pakistan's federal structure means that many aspects of governance, education, policing, local administration, health, and certain regulatory functions, operate at the provincial level. Freedom conditions therefore vary across regions. Provincial dashboards present standardized indicators that allow comparison among Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Balochistan, Islamabad Capital Territory, Azad Jammu and Kashmir, and Gilgit-Baltistan. This approach fosters constructive competition, highlights best practices, and enables context-specific policy calibration rather than uniform assumptions.

Finally, the report aims to strengthen Pakistan's narrative through data-driven analysis. International perceptions are often shaped by external indices and selective reporting. By producing a transparent, methodologically sound national assessment, Pakistan can contribute its own calibrated evidence to global discourse. A data-driven narrative does not dismiss challenges; it contextualizes them, documents reform momentum, and clarifies institutional realities. In doing so, the report supports informed engagement with investors, development partners, civil society, and citizens, grounded in measurable progress rather than rhetoric.

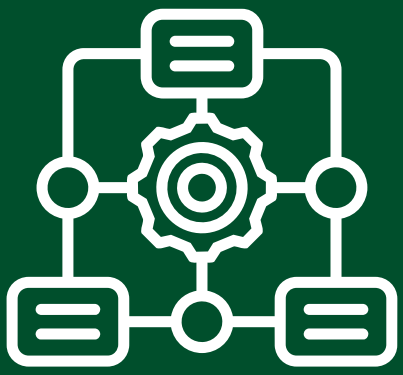
It is not a political commentary, nor a normative judgment. It is a governance diagnostic tool.

1.7 A Forward-Looking Framework

Freedom cannot be reduced to binary classifications. It exists on a spectrum influenced by policy decisions, institutional design, judicial behavior, economic regulation, and digital governance. The objective is not perfection but progress, measurable, accountable, and transparent.

The chapters that follow construct a comprehensive Freedom Architecture Model built on pillars, sub-pillars, weighted indicators, and comparative benchmarks. Together, they provide a systematic assessment of where Pakistan stands, and where it can move.

Freedom matters because it shapes the lived experience of citizens, the credibility of institutions, and the trajectory of national development. Measuring it carefully is the first step toward strengthening it.



Chapter 2:

Methodology and Framework

A rigorous methodology underpins the credibility of the The Freedom Report. Measuring freedoms requires conceptual clarity, structured indicators, reliable data sources, and balanced interpretation. This chapter outlines the analytical framework, data collection processes, survey design, sampling structure, and validation methods used in constructing the Freedom Index for Pakistan.

The methodological approach integrates three complementary components:

1. Desk-Based Institutional and Legal Review
2. National Quantitative Trust Survey
3. Qualitative In-Depth Interviews

Together, these layers ensure that freedom is assessed through both structural evidence and lived experience.

2.1 Conceptual Framework

The report adopts a multidimensional Freedom Architecture Model structured around core pillars:

» Political Freedom

» Civil Liberties

» Rule of Law & Institutional Integrity

» Digital Freedom

» Economic Freedom

» Inclusive Freedom (Gender & Minority Dimensions)

Each pillar is divided into sub-pillars and measurable indicators. Indicators are weighted and scored using a standardized scale to allow provincial and national comparison. The framework aligns with constitutional guarantees, SDG 16 targets, and internationally recognized governance benchmarks while remaining grounded in Pakistan's institutional realities.

Freedom is treated not as a binary condition but as a spectrum shaped by institutional capacity, regulatory design, judicial oversight, and citizen perception.

2.2 Desk Review and Constitutional Literature Analysis

The first component of the methodology consists of a comprehensive desk review designed to anchor the assessment in documented institutional and legal evidence. This review draws upon constitutional provisions, including the 1973 Constitution and its subsequent amendments, as well as federal and provincial legislation that shapes the operational environment of rights and freedoms. Judicial precedents and case law are examined to understand how constitutional guarantees have been interpreted, expanded, or limited through judicial reasoning. Regulatory frameworks governing media, digital space, economic activity, and public administration are also analyzed to assess how freedoms are structured and implemented in practice.

In addition to legal sources, the desk review incorporates ministry and institutional annual reports to evaluate performance trends and administrative accountability. Reports of the Auditor General provide insight into transparency, financial oversight, and institutional integrity. Parliamentary proceedings are reviewed to understand legislative intent, debate patterns, and oversight functions. Official statistical publications offer empirical data on socio-economic indicators that intersect with freedom, such as education, employment, digital access, and access to justice. International governance indices are examined comparatively to situate Pakistan's institutional performance within broader global benchmarks, while retaining contextual sensitivity.

The constitutional literature review specifically establishes the normative foundations of freedom by examining Part II of the Constitution, which outlines Fundamental Rights, along with relevant judicial interpretations. Legislative analysis identifies both formal protections and permissible limitations, clarifying the regulatory scope within which freedoms operate. Institutional documentation, including administrative reports and oversight findings, helps assess whether legal guarantees are effectively implemented or remain largely procedural.

This desk-based approach ensures that the Freedom Report is grounded in verifiable, publicly available documentation rather than perception alone. By relying on official records, statutory instruments, judicial decisions, and documented institutional performance, the assessment maintains analytical rigor and transparency. It provides a structural baseline against which perception-based findings from surveys and interviews can be compared and interpreted.

2.3 National Quantitative Trust Survey

To complement the institutional and legal analysis, a nationwide Trust Survey was conducted between December 2025 and March 2026. The purpose of the survey was to capture perception-based insights on governance, institutional credibility, and the lived experience of freedoms across Pakistan. While desk reviews and constitutional analysis provide structural evidence, public trust and citizen sentiment offer an equally important dimension of assessment. The Trust Survey therefore serves as a critical empirical pillar of the Freedom Index.

The survey was administered to a total of 2,000 respondents across all provinces and territories, including Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Balochistan, Islamabad Capital Territory, Azad Jammu and Kashmir, and Gilgit-Baltistan. A stratified sampling approach was adopted to ensure demographic representation across age groups, gender, urban and rural populations, education levels, and socio-economic categories.

This sampling design was intended to reflect the diversity of Pakistan's population and reduce the risk of regional or demographic bias. The survey instrument was structured and quantitative in nature, relying on standardized questions to allow consistent measurement and statistical comparability.

The Trust Survey measures perception-based indicators across multiple dimensions relevant to freedom and governance. These include assessments of institutional transparency, perceived prevalence of corruption, trust in public institutions, economic opportunities, media freedom, political expression, equality and inclusion, and upward mobility. Respondents were asked to evaluate the degree to which institutions operate transparently, whether corruption is effectively addressed, and whether public authorities respond adequately to citizen concerns. The survey also explores whether individuals feel they can freely express political opinions, access reliable information, and pursue economic advancement without structural discrimination.

Structured rating-scale questions form the core of the instrument, enabling respondents to quantify their perceptions on standardized scales. For example, participants evaluate how freely they believe citizens can express criticism of public authorities, how effectively corruption complaints are handled, and whether women and minority groups experience equal treatment under the law. These responses are translated into numerical indicators that can be aggregated and compared across regions and demographic categories.

The quantitative results are statistically consolidated to produce national averages, provincial breakdowns, and cross-demographic comparisons. This allows the identification of perception gaps between urban and rural populations, between younger and older cohorts, and across income or education levels. Such disaggregation provides insight into how freedoms are experienced differently across Pakistan's socio-economic and geographic landscape.

Within the broader methodology, the Trust Survey functions as a perception calibration layer in the Freedom Index. Structural indicators derived from legal and institutional review are balanced against citizen sentiment to ensure that the assessment reflects both formal guarantees and lived realities. Where institutional reforms show progress, the survey evaluates whether these improvements translate into increased public trust. Conversely, where perception gaps emerge, the findings highlight areas requiring further policy attention. In this way, the Trust Survey strengthens the analytical depth of the report by integrating measurable public experience into the institutional framework of freedom.

2.4 Qualitative In-Depth Interviews

Recognizing that quantitative data captures statistical breadth but often lacks interpretative depth, the methodology incorporated a qualitative component consisting of 45 in-depth interviews conducted across Pakistan. While the Trust Survey provides measurable indicators of perception and institutional trust, qualitative interviews allow participants to articulate experiences, contextual nuances, and underlying causes that structured survey questions may not fully capture. This qualitative layer strengthens the analytical richness of the Freedom Report by giving voice to lived realities behind numerical trends.

The qualitative discussion guide was organized around three thematic clusters: transparency and governance; economic growth and competitiveness; and political, social, and economic freedoms. These thematic areas mirror the structural pillars of the Freedom Report, ensuring coherence between perception-based narratives and institutional assessment.

In Section A, which focused on transparency and governance, participants were invited to characterize the current state of accountability within public institutions. They were asked to identify the types of corruption they perceive as most prevalent, assess how effectively citizen complaints are addressed, and suggest reforms that could meaningfully improve transparency. These questions encouraged respondents to move beyond general opinions and reflect on specific institutional behaviors and governance practices. To deepen insight, a projective technique was used in which participants described Pakistan's public institutions as a character in a story. This metaphorical framing often revealed implicit perceptions about trustworthiness, competence, responsiveness, or rigidity, offering valuable interpretative depth into institutional legitimacy and public confidence.

Section B examined economic growth and competitiveness. Respondents were asked to assess Pakistan's current economic direction, identify key challenges faced by businesses, evaluate the effectiveness of government policies in supporting investment and job creation, and highlight sectors with future growth potential. These discussions provided qualitative insight into regulatory burdens, structural inefficiencies, and reform expectations. A projective question invited participants to imagine Pakistan's economy as a "vehicle," describing what type of vehicle it would be and what it would require to operate more efficiently. This metaphor helped elicit candid reflections on structural weaknesses, governance bottlenecks, and systemic reform needs in a non-confrontational format.

Section C addressed political, social, and economic freedoms directly. Participants discussed how freely citizens can express political opinions or criticism, the level of media independence and access to reliable information, the extent to which women and minority groups experience equal treatment, and whether economic mobility feels attainable. These conversations allowed respondents to contextualize freedom within everyday experiences, highlighting perceived barriers, regional variations, or generational differences. A scenario-based question asked participants to imagine a new citizen visiting Pakistan for the first time and to identify which freedoms would be immediately visible and which would appear constrained. This approach encouraged comparative reflection and helped reveal perceived strengths and weaknesses in civic space.

The qualitative interviews concluded with an integrative "Tomorrow Scenario" question. Participants were asked to imagine that Pakistan became significantly more transparent, fair, and economically strong overnight, and to describe the first visible sign that would indicate meaningful transformation. This forward-looking reflection provided insight into reform priorities and the symbolic indicators citizens associate with institutional credibility and freedom.

Collectively, the qualitative component complements quantitative findings by uncovering the reasoning, emotions, and experiences that shape public perception. It adds interpretative depth to statistical patterns and allows the Freedom Report to move beyond measurement toward explanation.

2.5 Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Data

The methodological strength of this report lies in its triangulation approach, which integrates multiple sources and types of evidence to produce a balanced and credible assessment of freedom in Pakistan. Rather than relying on a single dataset or analytical lens, the report combines structural indicators, quantitative survey findings, and qualitative narratives. This layered design enhances analytical reliability by cross-validating findings across different forms of evidence.

Structural indicators form the institutional backbone of the analysis. These indicators measure formal legal frameworks, constitutional guarantees, regulatory structures, judicial mechanisms, and administrative processes. By examining documented laws, institutional performance records, oversight mechanisms, and implementation procedures, the report evaluates the formal conditions under which freedoms operate. Structural analysis answers foundational questions: What protections exist in law? What mechanisms enforce them? What regulatory limits apply? This component provides an objective baseline grounded in verifiable documentation.

Complementing this institutional review, quantitative survey data measures public trust and perception. Laws and policies may exist on paper, but their legitimacy depends on how they are experienced by citizens. The Trust Survey captures measurable sentiment across regions, age groups, and socio-economic categories. It assesses how freely individuals feel they can express opinions, how effectively institutions address corruption, and whether people perceive equal opportunity and fair treatment. These standardized responses generate statistical averages and allow comparison across provinces and demographic segments. Quantitative data thus provides breadth and comparability, offering insight into national patterns of trust and perceived freedom.

Qualitative interviews add contextual narratives and explanatory depth. Through open-ended questions and projective techniques, participants articulate experiences, frustrations, expectations, and reform suggestions that structured surveys cannot fully capture. Qualitative insights illuminate the reasons behind numerical trends, reveal subtle institutional dynamics, and highlight lived experiences of inclusion or constraint. They provide interpretative richness and nuance that strengthen the overall analysis.

The triangulation approach allows cross-verification between data sources. Where quantitative findings reveal perception gaps, for example, low trust in complaint redress mechanisms, qualitative interviews help explain the underlying causes, such as procedural delays or communication failures. Conversely, where institutional documentation indicates reform progress, such as digitalization of services or legislative amendments, the survey data assesses whether these changes translate into improved citizen experience. This reciprocal validation reduces the risk of over-reliance on either formal documentation or perception alone.

By integrating structural evidence, statistical measurement, and narrative insight, the report minimizes bias and enhances interpretative robustness. It ensures that freedom is assessed not as a purely legal construct nor solely as a subjective sentiment, but as a dynamic interaction between institutional design and lived reality. This methodological triangulation strengthens both credibility and policy relevance, enabling a more comprehensive understanding of Pakistan's freedom landscape.

2.6 Provincial and Demographic Disaggregation

Freedom indicators in this report are systematically disaggregated across multiple demographic and geographic dimensions to ensure that national averages do not obscure important variations in lived experience. Freedom is rarely uniform across a country as diverse and federal in structure as Pakistan. Differences in governance capacity, socio-economic development, infrastructure access, and social norms can significantly shape how freedoms are experienced in practice. By breaking down data across provinces and territories, including Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Balochistan, Islamabad Capital Territory, Azad Jammu and Kashmir, and Gilgit-Baltistan, the report identifies regional disparities and institutional performance gaps. This provincial lens allows for context-sensitive analysis rather than one-dimensional national conclusions.

The report also distinguishes between urban and rural respondents. Access to media, digital infrastructure, legal services, and public institutions often varies significantly between metropolitan centers and remote districts. Urban populations may experience greater exposure to civic engagement opportunities and digital expression, while rural communities may encounter different structural constraints related to access, mobility, or service delivery. Disaggregating data along this axis reveals whether freedom is evenly distributed or concentrated in specific geographic clusters.

Gender-based analysis forms another critical dimension. Although constitutional rights are formally equal, lived realities may differ across men, women, and marginalized gender identities. By analyzing responses through a gender lens, the report assesses whether women perceive equal access to economic opportunity, political participation, and legal protection. This disaggregation highlights inclusion gaps and informs policy discussions related to representation, workplace participation, and safety.

Age cohorts are also examined separately to capture generational differences in perception. Younger citizens, particularly those who are digitally connected and globally aware, may hold different expectations regarding freedom of expression, mobility, and economic opportunity compared to older cohorts. Understanding these generational distinctions is essential for anticipating future governance demands and identifying emerging reform priorities.

Educational attainment and occupational sectors further shape the experience of freedom. Individuals with higher levels of education may have greater awareness of legal rights and institutional processes, influencing their expectations and perceptions. Similarly, professionals in formal sectors may interact with regulatory systems differently from informal workers or small entrepreneurs. By disaggregating across occupational categories, the report captures how regulatory frameworks and institutional accessibility affect economic freedom and mobility across diverse segments of society.

This multidimensional disaggregation enables the identification of structural inequalities and regional disparities in the freedom landscape. Rather than presenting a singular composite score, the report provides provincial dashboards that offer comparative scoring across key pillars of freedom. These dashboards highlight relative strengths and weaknesses, identify perception gaps, and pinpoint areas where reform acceleration may yield measurable improvements. In doing so, the report transforms aggregate measurement into actionable insight, enabling policymakers to tailor interventions according to regional and demographic realities.

2.7 Weighting and Scoring Model

Each pillar within the Freedom Report is assigned a proportional weight to reflect its relative importance within the overall architecture of freedom. This weighting structure ensures that the composite score does not overemphasize any single dimension, such as political freedom or economic liberty, at the expense of others. The allocation of weights is guided by constitutional priorities, governance relevance, and international benchmarking practices. By distributing proportional weight across pillars, the Report maintains internal balance while allowing meaningful comparison between categories.

All indicators are scored using a standardized scale, typically within a 0–100 index format. This uniform scoring system enhances comparability across pillars, provinces, and demographic segments. A standardized scale also allows for aggregation, trend analysis, and cross-sector evaluation without distortion. Scores closer to 100 reflect stronger institutional performance or higher levels of perceived freedom, while lower scores indicate structural weaknesses or perception gaps. The use of a consistent index format ensures clarity in interpretation and transparency in methodology.

Scores are derived through a combination of documented institutional evidence, legislative clarity, implementation records, survey averages, and qualitative thematic coding. Documented institutional evidence includes constitutional provisions, statutory frameworks, regulatory instruments, and official

reports that establish formal protections and governance structures. Legislative clarity assesses whether legal provisions are coherent, precise, and aligned with constitutional guarantees. Implementation records examine whether institutions operationalize these provisions effectively, considering factors such as enforcement mechanisms, oversight systems, and procedural consistency.

Quantitative survey averages contribute perception-based measurements, capturing how citizens evaluate transparency, freedom of expression, economic opportunity, and institutional trust. These survey results are statistically aggregated and normalized within the scoring framework. In parallel, qualitative thematic coding extracts recurring patterns, concerns, and reform suggestions from in-depth interviews. While qualitative data does not directly assign numerical scores, it informs the interpretative weighting and contextual understanding of indicators.

Perception data is incorporated as a calibrated weight rather than treated as a standalone determinant. This means that survey findings influence scoring but do not override structural evidence. Institutional documentation and legal frameworks retain primary weighting to ensure analytical stability and prevent temporary fluctuations in public sentiment from disproportionately shaping the Report. The calibrated approach acknowledges that perception is essential to understanding lived freedom, yet it must be interpreted within the context of institutional realities.

By combining structural evidence with calibrated perception data, the scoring model achieves methodological balance. It avoids the risk of relying exclusively on legal text, which may overlook implementation gaps, and equally avoids over-reliance on sentiment, which may reflect short-term political climates. This blended weighting system enhances credibility, consistency, and policy relevance, ensuring that the Freedom Index reflects both formal governance conditions and experiential realities in a stable and systematic manner.

2.8 Indicator Architecture and Scoring Model

The Indicator Architecture and Scoring Model form the analytical backbone of the Freedom Report. A structured index requires conceptual clarity, measurable components, transparent weighting, and replicable scoring. The architecture adopted in this report is designed to translate constitutional principles and governance realities into a coherent, evidence-based measurement system that is both technically rigorous and policy-relevant.

Multi-Pillar Structure

The Freedom Index is organized around six primary pillars: Political Freedom; Civil Liberties; Rule of Law and Institutional Integrity; Digital Freedom; Economic Freedom; and Inclusive Freedom. Each pillar is further divided into sub-pillars, and each sub-pillar is operationalized through specific indicators. This tiered structure ensures that broad constitutional concepts are broken down into measurable components.

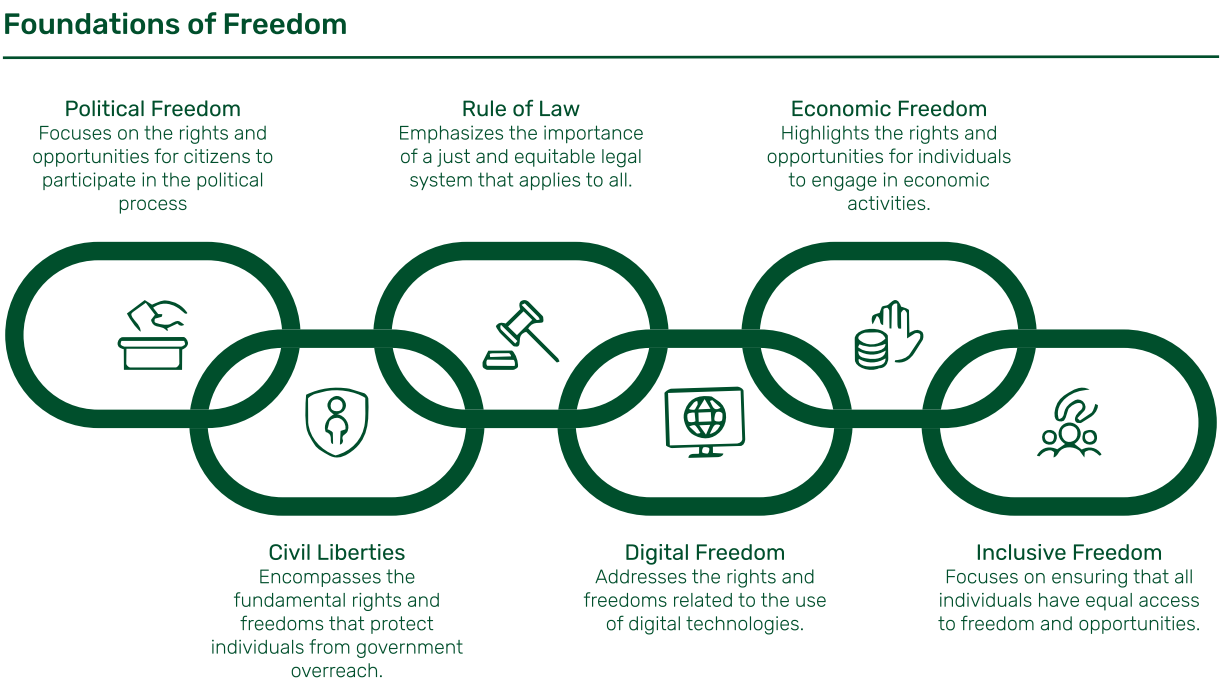


Figure : Foundations of Freedom, Freedom Report 2026

For example, Political Freedom includes sub-indicators related to electoral integrity, pluralism, legislative oversight, and local governance. Civil Liberties includes freedom of expression, media independence, association rights, and religious freedom. Economic Freedom examines property rights, regulatory burden, and access to markets. This layered architecture ensures analytical granularity while preserving conceptual coherence.

Standardized Scoring Format

All indicators are scored using a standardized 0–100 index format. This normalization allows comparability across pillars and provinces and prevents distortion caused by different measurement scales. A higher score reflects stronger institutional performance or higher perceived freedom, while lower scores indicate structural constraints or perception gaps.

To ensure transparency, each indicator score is derived from documented criteria rather than subjective judgment. Structural indicators are evaluated against predefined benchmarks, such as clarity of legislation, existence of oversight mechanisms, enforcement records, and compliance standards.

Composite Score Construction

The overall Freedom Score is calculated using a weighted aggregation formula:

$$\text{Freedom Index Score} = \Sigma\ (\text{Pillar Weight} \times \text{Pillar Score})$$

Each pillar score is itself derived from weighted sub-pillar indicators. Structural indicators carry primary weight to maintain stability and reduce volatility caused by short-term perception shifts. Perception-based indicators derived from the Trust Survey are incorporated as calibrated modifiers, ensuring that lived experience informs the final score without disproportionately skewing results.

Qualitative findings from in-depth interviews are not numerically scored but are thematically coded. These insights inform interpretative adjustments and contextual explanations where quantitative or structural data show divergence.

Weighting Logic

Weights assigned to pillars reflect their constitutional centrality and governance impact. Core rule-of-law and civil liberty dimensions receive significant weight, given their foundational role in safeguarding all other freedoms. Economic and digital freedoms are weighted to reflect their growing structural importance in contemporary governance. Inclusive freedom, particularly gender and minority equality, is embedded across pillars while retaining distinct scoring recognition.

The weighting structure is designed to balance normative rights, institutional functionality, and lived experience.

Margin of Error

The survey results are reported at a 95% confidence level, indicating a high degree of statistical reliability within the stated margin of error.

2.9 Data Sources (National & International)

The credibility of the Freedom Report rests significantly on the diversity, reliability, and transparency of its data sources. To ensure analytical rigor, the report draws upon both national and international datasets, combining primary research with secondary documentation. This blended sourcing strategy allows the assessment to remain grounded in Pakistan's institutional realities while maintaining global comparability.

National Data Sources

At the national level, primary reliance is placed on constitutional texts, statutory instruments, and official government documentation. The Constitution of 1973 and its amendments provide the normative framework for assessing rights and freedoms. Federal and provincial legislation are reviewed to evaluate legal protections, regulatory scope, and permissible restrictions. Judicial precedents from the Supreme Court and High Courts are analyzed to understand how constitutional freedoms are interpreted and enforced in practice.

Institutional performance data are derived from ministry annual reports, policy documents, regulatory authority publications, and official gazette notifications. Reports of the Auditor General are examined to assess financial transparency, oversight effectiveness, and governance integrity. Parliamentary proceedings and committee reports provide insight into legislative oversight and accountability mechanisms.

Official statistical data from national bodies, including labor force surveys, demographic surveys, economic surveys, and digital penetration statistics, inform socio-economic dimensions of freedom, such as economic

opportunity, employment, education access, and digital inclusion. Provincial government documentation is used to construct regional dashboards and assess subnational governance variation.

In addition to administrative data, primary research conducted for this report, the nationwide Trust Survey and qualitative interviews, serves as a foundational source. These instruments provide structured perception-based evidence and contextual narratives that complement formal documentation.

International Data Sources

To situate Pakistan within a comparative global framework, the report references selected international governance and development indices. These include datasets related to rule of law, corruption perception, media freedom, digital governance, economic freedom, and institutional quality. International sources are not adopted uncritically; rather, they are used for benchmarking and comparative calibration.

Global indices provide insight into how Pakistan's institutional environment is perceived internationally and allow cross-country comparison with South Asian peers, lower-middle-income economies, and other relevant comparator groups. However, where discrepancies arise between international rankings and national documentation, contextual analysis is applied to interpret divergences.

International human rights frameworks and Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) indicators, particularly those related to SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions), are also used as alignment references. These frameworks help situate freedom within globally recognized governance standards while allowing for contextual adaptation.

Cross-Verification and Source Integrity

A key methodological principle guiding data selection is cross-verification. Structural claims are corroborated across multiple sources where possible. Legislative analysis is supported by judicial interpretation. Institutional performance claims are reviewed alongside audit findings. Survey perceptions are compared with documented reforms. This layered verification reduces the risk of reliance on isolated or incomplete data points.

All sources used in the report are publicly available or ethically collected through informed research processes. Where documentation gaps exist, they are noted transparently rather than inferred.

2.10 Ethical Considerations

The Trust Survey and qualitative interviews were conducted in accordance with established ethical research standards to ensure credibility, participant safety, and data integrity. Given the sensitivity of topics such as governance performance, corruption, political expression, and institutional trust, particular care was taken to safeguard respondents' rights and well-being throughout the research process.

Participation in both the quantitative and qualitative components was strictly voluntary. Respondents were informed that their involvement was optional and that they could decline to answer any question or withdraw from the study at any stage without consequence. This principle of voluntary participation ensured that responses were provided freely and without coercion, thereby enhancing authenticity and reliability.

Informed consent was obtained prior to commencing interviews or administering survey instruments. Participants were briefed on the purpose of the study, the themes under discussion, the intended use of the data, and the measures taken to protect their identity. They were also informed that there were no right or wrong answers and that the study sought honest perceptions rather than evaluative judgments. Consent procedures were designed to be clear, transparent, and culturally sensitive.

Confidentiality was a central ethical commitment. Personal identifiers were not disclosed in any published findings, and individual responses were aggregated for analytical purposes. Where respondents requested anonymity, identifying details were omitted entirely from documentation and reporting. This approach was particularly important in discussions relating to political freedoms, corruption, and institutional performance, where participants may have felt vulnerable expressing candid views.

Secure data storage protocols were implemented to protect collected information. Survey responses and interview recordings were stored in controlled-access environments, with limited access granted only to authorized research personnel. Digital files were password-protected, and physical notes were securely maintained to prevent unauthorized access or disclosure.

The research design also emphasized non-partisan and neutral questioning. The instruments were structured to avoid leading language, evaluative framing, or political bias. Questions were formulated to invite open reflection rather than endorse any particular viewpoint. Interviewers were trained to maintain professional neutrality, refrain from expressing personal opinions, and ensure that discussions remained respectful and balanced.

Special attention was given to handling sensitive topics with care. Issues related to corruption, media freedom, minority rights, and political expression were approached in a manner that minimized discomfort. Participants were reminded that they could skip any question if they felt uneasy. Interviewers were trained to listen attentively, allow pauses, and avoid pressuring respondents for elaboration beyond their comfort level.

Collectively, these ethical safeguards ensured that the research process respected participant dignity, maintained data integrity, and upheld professional standards. By embedding ethical considerations into every stage of data collection and analysis, the report strengthens both its methodological credibility and its legitimacy as a neutral, evidence-based assessment of freedom in Pakistan.

2.11 Limitations

While the methodology of this report is designed to be rigorous and multidimensional, it acknowledges certain inherent limitations that accompany large-scale governance and perception assessments. Recognizing these constraints is essential to maintaining analytical transparency and interpretative caution.

First, perception-based data—while invaluable—may reflect temporary political climates or recent events. Public sentiment can fluctuate in response to high-profile court decisions, media controversies, economic shocks, or political transitions. As a result, survey findings may capture short-term reactions rather than long-term structural realities. Although perception remains a critical indicator of trust and lived experience, it must be interpreted within the broader institutional and historical context to avoid overstating momentary trends.

Second, institutional documentation varies in depth and transparency across ministries and provinces. Some institutions maintain detailed annual reports, open data portals, and accessible records, while others provide limited publicly available information. Variations in documentation practices can affect the completeness of structural analysis. The absence of documentation does not automatically indicate absence of performance; however, it does signal potential transparency gaps. These inconsistencies require careful cross-referencing with supplementary sources and contextual evaluation.

Third, regional access constraints may influence the depth and texture of responses in certain geographic areas. Differences in infrastructure, connectivity, security considerations, or logistical challenges can affect the manner in which surveys and interviews are conducted. While the sampling design ensures national representation, variations in response richness or contextual elaboration may occur across provinces and territories. These regional dynamics are considered during analysis to avoid overgeneralization.

Additionally, legal guarantees do not automatically translate into lived equality. Constitutional protections may exist uniformly across the country, yet their practical realization can differ depending on socio-economic conditions, institutional capacity, and social norms. The presence of strong legal frameworks does not necessarily eliminate barriers faced by women, minorities, or marginalized communities. Therefore, the report distinguishes between normative rights and operational freedoms, ensuring that structural assessment is complemented by perception and qualitative evidence.

The preparation of this report also utilized advanced analytical tools, including OpenAI-powered large language models, to enhance clarity, vocabulary, and structured presentation of findings. These tools were employed to assist in synthesizing large volumes of qualitative and quantitative data, improving coherence of expression, and supporting analytical organization. However, all interpretations, judgments, and conclusions remain grounded in the underlying data and guided by human oversight. Artificial intelligence tools functioned as research and language support systems rather than decision-making authorities, and outputs were reviewed and validated by the research team.

To address methodological limitations overall, the report relies on cross-verification and cautious interpretation. Structural indicators are validated against survey findings and qualitative narratives. Where discrepancies arise, interpretative analysis is applied rather than definitive judgment. This triangulation approach mitigates the risk of bias and enhances the robustness of conclusions. By openly acknowledging both methodological constraints and the role of analytical tools, the report reinforces its commitment to transparency, credibility, and evidence-based assessment.

The methodology of the the Freedom Report combines legal analysis, institutional documentation, quantitative perception measurement, and qualitative narrative insight. This layered approach ensures that freedom is assessed as both a constitutional structure and a lived experience.

By integrating desk review, a 2,000-respondent Trust Survey, and 45 in-depth interviews across Pakistan, the report constructs a dynamic, evidence-based framework. Freedom is thus measured not as rhetoric, but as an institutional condition, a regulatory environment, and a citizen experience, capable of comparative evaluation and reform-oriented analysis.



Chapter 3:

Political Freedom

Political freedom represents the foundation of democratic governance and determines the extent to which citizens can participate in shaping political authority and public policy. It reflects the ability of individuals to freely choose their representatives, organize politically, compete for power, and hold governing institutions accountable. In constitutional democracies, political freedom is not only expressed through periodic elections but also through the broader institutional environment that ensures pluralism, transparency, accountability, and checks and balances within the state.

In Pakistan, political freedom is formally guaranteed through the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan (1973), which provides citizens with the right to vote, form associations and political parties, participate in public affairs, and elect representatives to legislative bodies. However, the effective exercise of these freedoms depends on the integrity of electoral processes, the openness of political competition, the functioning of democratic institutions, and the independence of oversight mechanisms.

This chapter examines the state of political freedom in Pakistan through six interrelated dimensions: electoral integrity and participation, political pluralism and party competition, the functioning of government, the role of parliament and oversight institutions, the autonomy of local governments, and the broader balance between civilian authority and institutional power centers. Together, these indicators provide a comprehensive understanding of how political power is exercised, contested, and constrained within Pakistan's governance system.

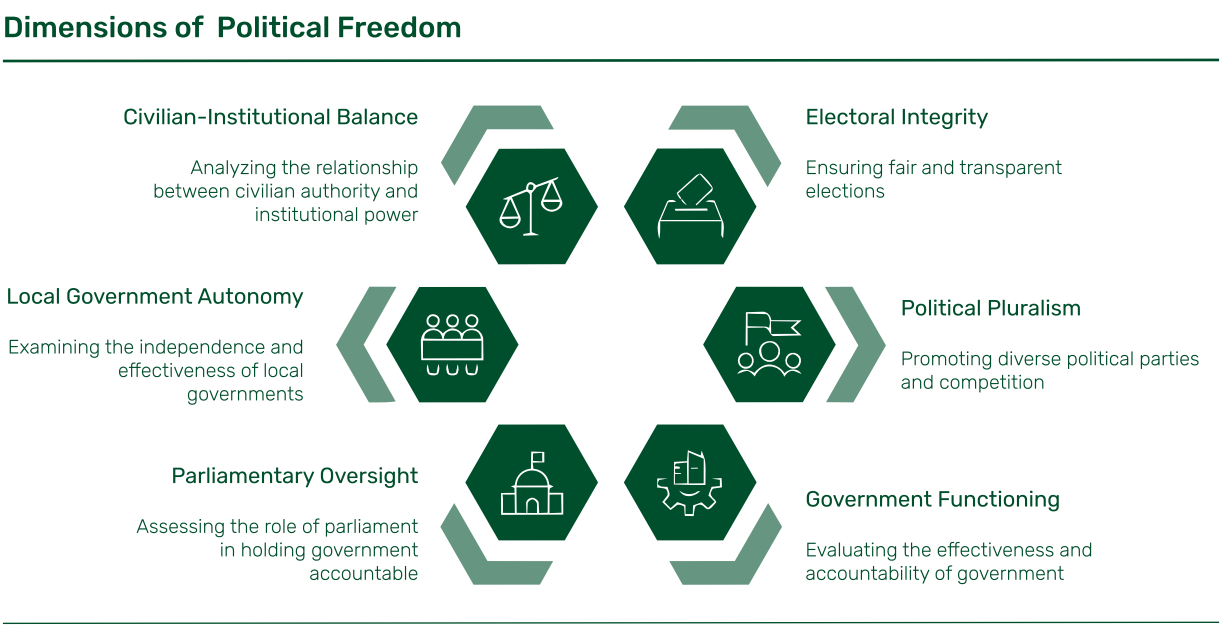


Figure : Dimensions of Political Freedom, The Freedom Report 2026

The analysis combines constitutional provisions, institutional performance, legal frameworks, and citizen perceptions gathered through the State of Freedom Trust Survey. By examining both structural guarantees and lived political realities, the chapter seeks to assess not only whether political freedoms exist in law, but also whether they function effectively in practice.

3.1 Electoral Integrity and Participation

Electoral integrity constitutes one of the most fundamental expressions of political freedom in a democratic system. It reflects the ability of citizens to freely choose their representatives through transparent, inclusive, and credible electoral processes. In Pakistan, the right of citizens to participate in elections and influence public governance is protected through several provisions of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan (1973), which establish both the legal guarantee of political participation and the institutional framework responsible for conducting elections.

The Constitution ensures political participation primarily through Article 17, which guarantees the freedom of association and explicitly recognizes the right of citizens to form political parties. This provision forms the constitutional basis for political organization and participation in electoral politics. Additionally, Article 25 guarantees equality before law and equal protection of law, ensuring that all citizens have equal political rights regardless of gender, ethnicity, or social status.

The conduct of elections is governed under Articles 213 to 221 of the Constitution, which establish the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) as an independent constitutional body responsible for organizing and supervising elections to the National Assembly, Provincial Assemblies, the Senate, and the offices of President and Prime Minister. Article 218 specifically mandates the Election Commission to ensure that elections are conducted “honestly, justly, fairly and in accordance with law,” and to guard against corrupt practices during the electoral process.

Further strengthening electoral participation, Article 51 outlines the composition and election of members of the National Assembly, including provisions for general seats, reserved seats for women, and seats for non-Muslim minorities. These provisions aim to enhance representation and inclusivity within Pakistan’s parliamentary system. Similarly, Article 106 provides the framework for the composition of Provincial Assemblies and includes reserved representation for women and minorities at the provincial level.

Electoral administration in Pakistan operates through a combination of constitutional bodies and supporting institutions. The Election Commission of Pakistan remains the primary authority responsible for voter registration, constituency delimitation, candidate nomination processes, election monitoring, and results management. The Commission maintains the electoral rolls based on the computerized national identity database maintained by the National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA), which plays a critical role in verifying voter identity and preventing duplication in voter lists.

Institutional Ecosystem Supporting Political Freedom

Political freedom in Pakistan is not safeguarded by constitutional guarantees alone; it also relies on the functioning of several institutions that collectively uphold democratic processes. Key institutions include:

- **Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP):** Responsible for the conduct of elections, voter registration, constituency delimitation, and enforcement of electoral rules.
- **Parliament of Pakistan:** Comprising the National Assembly and Senate, responsible for lawmaking, representation, and oversight of the executive branch.
- **Judiciary:** The Supreme Court and High Courts interpret the Constitution and adjudicate electoral disputes, protecting constitutional rights related to political participation.
- **Provincial Governments and Local Governments**: Responsible for implementing devolved political governance and ensuring representation at provincial and grassroots levels.
- **Caretaker Governments:** Temporarily administer governance during election periods to maintain neutrality and ensure fair electoral competition.
- **Civil Society and Media:** Play a crucial role in election monitoring, public accountability, and informing citizens about political processes.

The legal framework for elections is further elaborated through the Elections Act 2017, which consolidated various electoral laws and introduced reforms aimed at improving transparency, campaign finance oversight, and dispute resolution mechanisms. The Act also provides mechanisms for election tribunals, which adjudicate electoral disputes following the conclusion of elections.

Voter participation remains a key indicator of electoral freedom. Over the past two decades, Pakistan has seen moderate but fluctuating voter turnout levels, generally ranging between 45 percent and 55 percent in national elections. While the introduction of computerized voter lists and digital identity verification has improved administrative efficiency, disparities in participation continue to exist across gender, regional, and socio-economic groups. In particular, women's participation in some constituencies has historically been constrained by social barriers and local political arrangements, prompting increased attention from election authorities and civil society organizations.

The credibility of elections also depends on transparency in campaign financing, equitable media access for candidates, impartial enforcement of electoral rules, and effective oversight mechanisms. Institutions such as the Election Commission of Pakistan, Election Tribunals, the judiciary, and civil society election monitoring organizations collectively contribute to safeguarding the integrity of the electoral process.

Pakistan's constitutional framework provides strong safeguards for electoral integrity, and successive governments have continued to undertake reforms to strengthen democratic processes. While electoral systems in any developing democracy face operational challenges such as results transmission delays, constituency delimitation concerns, and political contestation, these issues are increasingly being addressed through institutional improvements and technological interventions. The government's continued focus on strengthening the Election Commission, improving transparency in campaign financing, and expanding political participation for women, youth, and marginalized communities reflects a broader commitment to deepening democratic inclusion and public confidence in the electoral process.

In assessing political freedom, electoral integrity should be understood not only through constitutional and legal guarantees, but also through the evolving effectiveness of institutions responsible for facilitating citizens' democratic participation and ensuring the continuity of the electoral process.

The Latest General Elections 2024 in Pakistan

The most recent general elections in Pakistan marked another significant moment in the country's democratic trajectory. Conducted under the supervision of the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP), the elections represented the continuation of Pakistan's constitutional commitment to representative governance as outlined in Articles 213–221 of the Constitution. Despite a complex political environment preceding the elections, the electoral process once again enabled citizens to exercise their fundamental political right to vote and participate in the formation of government.

Pakistan's electoral history has evolved considerably over the past two decades, transitioning from periods of political instability toward more regularized democratic transfers of power. The latest elections demonstrated that electoral competition remains vibrant, with multiple political parties and independent candidates contesting seats across the country. The participation of diverse political actors reflects the constitutional guarantee under Article 17, which ensures the freedom of association and the right of citizens to form political parties.

Voter participation in the elections reflected continued public engagement with democratic processes. Millions of citizens across Pakistan's provinces and federal territories cast their votes, reaffirming the electorate's willingness to engage in political decision-making despite economic pressures, political polarization, and security concerns in certain regions. The participation of women voters, although uneven across constituencies, continued to increase in several districts, partly due to targeted voter awareness campaigns and regulatory requirements mandating minimum levels of female participation in polling stations.

At the same time, the elections unfolded within a complex political and administrative environment that reflected many of the longstanding challenges associated with Pakistan's democratic evolution. Various political stakeholders, civil society organizations, and observers highlighted concerns relating to campaign dynamics, candidate eligibility matters, and the broader electoral environment. Public discourse also included discussions around administrative procedures, campaign facilitation, and access to media and outreach platforms for political parties. Despite these challenges, the electoral process demonstrated the continued functioning of democratic institutions and reflected the state's ongoing efforts to manage a highly competitive and politically diverse electoral landscape.

Another issue that attracted significant attention was the timeliness and transparency of results transmission. Delays in the announcement of results in certain constituencies were largely attributed to the scale and complexity of administering a highly competitive nationwide electoral process, prompting broader discussions on further strengthening the efficiency and technological capacity of electoral management systems in future elections. While election authorities attributed these delays to logistical and technological challenges, the experience underscored the importance of strengthening results management systems and communication protocols to maintain public confidence in the electoral process.

Despite these challenges, the elections ultimately resulted in the formation of a civilian government through parliamentary procedures. The successful formation of a functioning government through the electoral process reflects the resilience and continuity of Pakistan's constitutional and democratic framework. The post-election parliamentary process, including coalition-building, leadership consultations, and the peaceful transition toward executive governance, demonstrated the maturity of democratic institutions and the system's capacity to ensure political stability. This process highlighted the strength of parliamentary democracy in managing political diversity while maintaining institutional continuity and governance effectiveness.

From a governance perspective, the elections also revealed several structural dynamics within Pakistan's political system. The increasing role of independent candidates, evolving patterns of coalition politics, and regional variations in voting behavior illustrate the complexity of Pakistan's political landscape. These trends suggest that political representation in Pakistan is becoming more fluid and decentralized, with electoral outcomes shaped by both national narratives and localized political dynamics.

For Pakistan's democratic institutions, the key challenge moving forward is to strengthen public trust in electoral processes. Electoral legitimacy depends not only on the conduct of elections but also on the perception of fairness among citizens and political actors. Ensuring transparent electoral administration, strengthening dispute resolution mechanisms, improving voter access, and enhancing the neutrality of state institutions will remain essential for consolidating democratic confidence.

In the broader context of political freedom, the 2024 elections reflected both the resilience and continuity of Pakistan's democratic system. The electoral process resulted in the formation of a coalition government at the federal level, while different political parties secured mandates across the provinces, demonstrating political diversity and the functioning of representative democracy. The Pakistan Peoples Party formed the government in Sindh, the Pakistan Muslim League (N) formed the government in Punjab, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf–backed representatives emerged dominant in

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, while a coalition arrangement was established in Balochistan. This distribution of political authority across the federation highlighted the electorate's varied political preferences and reinforced the constitutional transfer of power through democratic means.

The constitutional framework continues to provide the legal basis for electoral participation and democratic governance, while the experience of the 2024 elections also underscored the importance of continuously strengthening institutional capacity, administrative efficiency, and public confidence in electoral processes. As Pakistan advances in its democratic journey, ongoing reforms aimed at enhancing transparency, institutional coordination, technological modernization, and inclusive political participation will remain important for further consolidating electoral credibility and democratic stability.

Statistical Snapshot: Pakistan's Latest General Elections 2024

The latest general elections 2024 in Pakistan represented one of the largest democratic exercises in the country's history. Conducted across four provinces and the federal territories, the elections involved millions of voters, thousands of candidates, and hundreds of constituencies across the National and Provincial Assemblies.

Electoral Overview

The electorate included nearly equal proportions of male and female voters, reflecting improvements in voter registration through the computerized identity database maintained by NADRA. However, disparities in turnout between men and women continued to exist in some districts due to socio-cultural constraints, mobility limitations, and local political arrangements.

Distribution of Major Political Outcomes (National Assembly)

Following the elections, coalition negotiations among political parties led to the formation of a federal government through parliamentary procedures. The results reflected a fragmented electoral mandate, making coalition-building an essential component of government formation.

Gender Representation

Pakistan's constitutional framework demonstrates a strong commitment to inclusive political participation by ensuring women's representation through reserved seats under Articles 51 and 106. These provisions have significantly strengthened women's presence in national and provincial legislatures and reflect the government's continued efforts to promote gender inclusion in democratic institutions. Alongside reserved representation, increasing policy attention is also being given to encouraging greater direct participation of women from general constituencies, further advancing the broader agenda of political empowerment and equal opportunity.

Key Observations and Reform Needs

The latest elections revealed both the strengths and challenges within Pakistan's democratic architecture. Several structural observations emerge that are relevant to the broader assessment of political freedom.

1. Electoral Participation Remains Robust but Uneven

Despite political polarization and economic pressures, millions of citizens participated in the electoral process. However, turnout levels remained below half of the eligible electorate, suggesting the need for stronger voter engagement initiatives, particularly among youth and women.

2. Rise of Independent Candidates

One of the most notable features of the elections was the strong performance of independent candidates. This phenomenon highlighted the adaptability of political competition within Pakistan's electoral system and demonstrated that voters can mobilize support outside traditional party structures when political conditions change.

3. Fragmented Electoral Mandate

The distribution of seats resulted in a fragmented parliament, requiring coalition-building among multiple political actors. While coalition governments are common in parliamentary systems, fragmented mandates can sometimes complicate governance and policy continuity.

4. Election Administration Challenges

Delays in the transmission and announcement of election results in certain constituencies raised concerns regarding transparency and administrative efficiency. Strengthening the technological infrastructure and operational capacity of the Election Commission of Pakistan remains an important priority.

5. Gender Participation Gap

Although Pakistan has made progress in increasing female voter registration and parliamentary representation, women's turnout remains uneven across regions. Continued efforts are needed to remove social and institutional barriers that limit women's political participation.

6. Public Trust in Electoral Institutions

One of the most important dimensions of democratic consolidation is the continued strengthening of public confidence in electoral institutions. The credibility of the electoral process is shaped not only by adherence to constitutional and procedural requirements, but also by citizens' broader perception that elections are administered in a transparent, inclusive, and accountable manner. In recent years, Pakistan's electoral institutions have undertaken a range of administrative, technological, and regulatory measures aimed at improving electoral management, enhancing oversight mechanisms, and facilitating greater public participation in the democratic process.

3.2 Political Pluralism and Party Competition

Political pluralism is a defining feature of democratic systems and reflects the extent to which diverse political views, organizations, and leadership groups are able to compete freely for political power. It encompasses the freedom to establish political parties, participate in electoral competition, mobilize public support, and advocate alternative policy visions without undue restrictions or discrimination. A pluralistic political environment enables citizens to choose between competing political platforms and ensures that political authority remains responsive to public preferences.

In Pakistan, political pluralism is constitutionally protected under Article 17 of the Constitution, which guarantees the freedom of association and explicitly affirms the right of citizens to form or be members of political parties. This provision establishes the legal foundation for multi-party politics and political organization. Political parties must register with the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) and comply with regulatory requirements outlined in the Elections Act 2017, including provisions related to internal party elections, financial disclosures, and candidate nomination procedures.

Major Political Parties in Pakistan and Ideological Orientation

Pakistan's political landscape is characterized by a diverse mix of national and regional parties representing different ideological traditions, governance priorities, and regional constituencies. While some parties operate nationwide, others primarily represent specific provinces, ethnic groups, or ideological movements. This diversity reflects the pluralistic nature of Pakistan's political system and its federal structure.

Pakistan's political system also allows independent candidates to contest elections, which has historically provided space for local political actors, tribal leaders, and constituency-based politicians to participate outside formal party structures.

Pakistan operates under a multi-party parliamentary system, where several national and regional parties compete in elections for representation in the National Assembly and Provincial Assemblies. Major political parties have historically included the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz), the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), and Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), alongside a wide range of regional and ideological parties such as the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM), Awami National Party (ANP), Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (JUI), and various nationalist parties in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The presence of both national and regional political actors contributes to the diversity of political representation across Pakistan's federating units.

Political competition in Pakistan is shaped by both national narratives and localized electoral dynamics. Regional political identities, ethnic representation, and constituency-level alliances often play a significant role in electoral outcomes. This diversity reflects Pakistan's complex socio-political landscape and highlights the importance of accommodating multiple political voices within the democratic system.

However, the effective functioning of political pluralism depends not only on the legal right to form political

parties but also on the broader political environment in which parties operate. Issues such as access to campaign resources, media coverage, regulatory scrutiny, and legal challenges can influence the ability of parties to compete on an equal footing. Political polarization, legal proceedings involving party leadership, and institutional interventions have periodically affected the competitive landscape of Pakistani politics.

Another dimension of political pluralism relates to internal party democracy. While political parties are required under the Elections Act to hold internal elections and maintain organizational structures, the degree to which leadership selection and decision-making processes are participatory varies among parties. Strengthening internal party governance can contribute to broader democratic consolidation by promoting transparency, accountability, and leadership renewal within political organizations.

Evolution of Pakistan's Political Party System (1947–2024)

Pakistan's political party system has evolved through several distinct historical phases shaped by constitutional developments, political movements, military interventions, and institutional reforms. Understanding these phases helps explain the current nature of political competition and the structure of party pluralism in the country.

Phase 1: Foundational Political Era (1947–1958)

In the early years following independence, Pakistan's political landscape was dominated by the All-India Muslim League, the party that had led the movement for the creation of Pakistan. However, the absence of strong institutionalized party structures and internal divisions gradually weakened the party's organizational strength. During this period, political competition remained limited, and governance structures were still evolving. Political instability, frequent changes in government leadership, and weak parliamentary institutions characterized this formative phase.

Phase 2: Centralized Governance and Restricted Party Competition (1958–1971)

The imposition of martial law in 1958 under General Ayub Khan marked a shift toward centralized governance and limited political competition. Political parties faced restrictions, and the political system operated through controlled political mechanisms such as the Basic Democracies system. Although some political activity continued, party competition was significantly constrained. This phase ended with the political crisis that followed the 1970 general elections, which ultimately contributed to the separation of East Pakistan and the creation of Bangladesh.

Phase 3: Ideological Party Consolidation (1971–1988)

Following the political upheaval of 1971, Pakistan entered a period of ideological political consolidation under the leadership of the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP). The adoption of the 1973 Constitution established a parliamentary democratic framework and strengthened political party participation. However, political competition remained uneven due to periods of authoritarian rule and restrictions on party activities, particularly during the military government of General Zia-ul-Haq (1977–1988), when political parties faced significant limitations.

Phase 4: Dynamic Multi-Party Democratic Competition (1988–2008)

The restoration of electoral politics after 1988 ushered in a period characterized by competitive rivalry between two major political parties: the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) and the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz). Governments alternated between these parties during successive elections, creating a de facto two-party competitive system at the national level. Despite frequent political confrontations and premature dissolutions of elected governments, this period strengthened the role of political parties in electoral competition and parliamentary governance.

Phase 5: Multiparty Fragmentation and Emerging Political Forces (2008–2024)

The period after 2008 marked an important transition toward a more diversified and participatory multiparty democratic system in Pakistan. The political landscape evolved with the emergence of new national political actors alongside established parties, creating broader electoral competition and greater voter engagement across the country. Regional parties continued to play an important role in provincial politics, particularly in Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Balochistan, contributing to stronger federal representation and political pluralism.

Recent elections have also reflected the growing significance of independent candidates, coalition-building, and consensus-based governance, highlighting the adaptability of Pakistan's parliamentary system. Political competition has become increasingly dynamic, shaped by both

national policy debates and local constituency priorities. The expansion of media platforms, digital political communication, and greater youth participation have further strengthened democratic engagement and broadened citizen involvement in the political process.

The presence of independent electoral system also adds an additional layer of competition. In recent elections, independent candidates have played a notable role in shaping parliamentary composition, demonstrating that electoral competition can occur both within and outside established party structures.

The media and civil society organizations further influence political pluralism by providing platforms for political debate, policy discussion, and public scrutiny of political actors. A vibrant public sphere enables citizens to evaluate competing political narratives and make informed choices during elections.

Despite these elements of pluralism, Pakistan's political environment continues to face structural challenges. Political polarization, restrictions on political mobilization in certain contexts, and perceptions of uneven political opportunities among parties have periodically raised concerns about the level playing field necessary for democratic competition. Ensuring equitable access to media, transparent campaign financing, and impartial enforcement of political regulations remains essential for maintaining credible political competition.

For the purposes of the Freedom Report, political pluralism is assessed not only through the legal existence of multiple

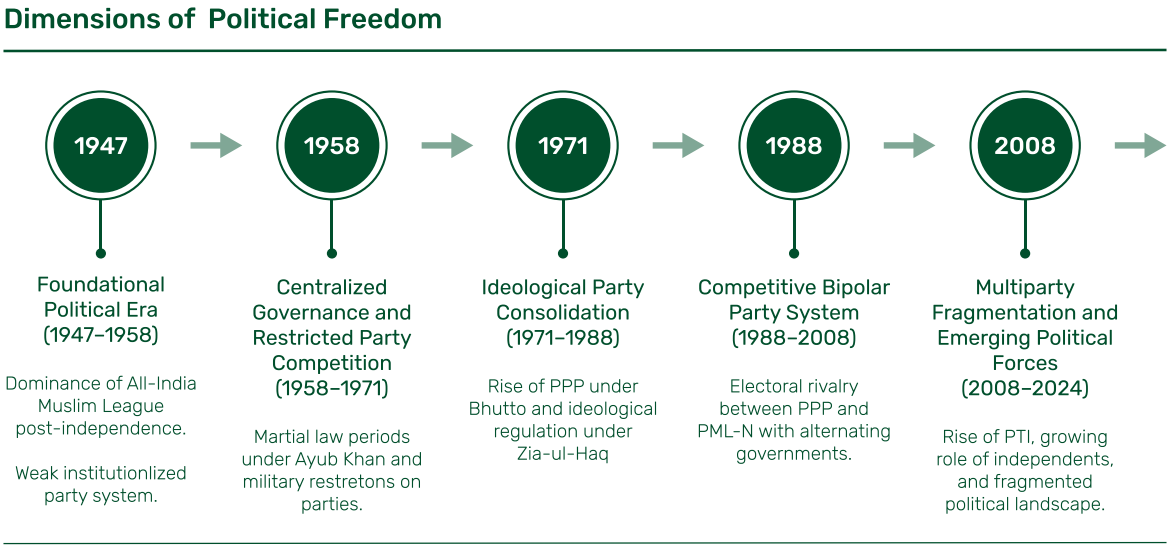


Figure : Evolution of Pakistan's Political Party System (1947-2024), The Freedom Report 2026

political parties but also through the practical ability of these parties to organize, campaign, and compete in elections without undue constraints. A robust pluralistic system ultimately strengthens democratic legitimacy by ensuring that citizens are presented with genuine political choices and alternative visions for governance.

3.3 Functioning of Government

The functioning of government is a central component of political freedom, as it reflects the ability of elected institutions to exercise authority effectively, transparently, and in accordance with constitutional principles. Democratic governance requires that governments formed through electoral processes are able to implement public policy, manage state institutions, and remain accountable to citizens and representative bodies. The quality of governance therefore depends not only on electoral legitimacy but also on the operational performance of the executive branch and the broader administrative system.

In Pakistan, the functioning of the federal government is defined by the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan (1973). Under Article 90, the executive authority of the federation is vested in the Federal Government, which is exercised in the name of the President but is effectively carried out by the Prime Minister and the Federal Cabinet. Article 91 provides the framework for the election of the Prime Minister by the National Assembly and establishes the principle that the executive must maintain the confidence of the lower house of Parliament.

The cabinet system forms the core of executive governance in Pakistan's parliamentary structure. Ministers are collectively responsible to the National Assembly under the principle of collective responsibility, which

requires that the executive remains accountable to elected representatives. This mechanism is intended to ensure that policy decisions reflect parliamentary oversight and that the government remains responsive to public concerns.

At the administrative level, the functioning of government relies on the civil service and federal ministries, which implement policy decisions and manage public programs across sectors such as economic development, social services, infrastructure, and national security. Pakistan's federal bureaucracy operates through a structured administrative framework composed of divisions, ministries, and autonomous regulatory bodies. These institutions are responsible for translating legislative and executive directives into operational policies.

Effective governance also requires coordination between the federal and provincial governments, particularly following the 18th Constitutional Amendment (2010), which significantly expanded provincial autonomy by devolving many policy areas such as health, education, and social services to the provinces. This decentralization has reshaped governance responsibilities and increased the importance of intergovernmental coordination through mechanisms such as the Council of Common Interests (CCI) established under Article 153 of the Constitution.

The functioning of government is further influenced by the relationship between political leadership and the administrative machinery of the state. Policy continuity, bureaucratic capacity, and institutional stability all play critical roles in determining how effectively governments can implement reforms and respond to emerging challenges. Frequent changes in leadership, political polarization, and coalition dynamics can sometimes affect the continuity of policy implementation and long-term governance planning.

Another important dimension of government functioning is transparency and accountability. Institutions such as the National Accountability Bureau (NAB), parliamentary committees, audit authorities, and the judiciary play a role in monitoring the actions of the executive branch. Additionally, public access to information under Article 19A of the Constitution provides citizens with the legal right to obtain information about government activities, thereby strengthening democratic oversight.

Despite the presence of constitutional safeguards and institutional mechanisms, the effectiveness of governance in Pakistan continues to face structural challenges. Administrative capacity constraints, overlapping institutional mandates, political instability, and bureaucratic inefficiencies can limit the ability of governments to implement policies effectively. Furthermore, perceptions of governance quality among citizens often depend on the delivery of public services, economic performance, and the transparency of decision-making processes.

For the purposes of the Freedom Report, the functioning of government is evaluated not only through constitutional provisions but also through the practical ability of elected authorities to exercise governance without undue interference, maintain policy continuity, and remain accountable to both Parliament and the public. A well-functioning government strengthens political freedom by ensuring that electoral mandates translate into effective public governance and that citizens retain the ability to influence government actions through democratic institutions.

3.4 Role of Parliament and Oversight Mechanisms

Parliamentary oversight is a central pillar of democratic governance and an essential safeguard for political freedom. In parliamentary systems, legislatures serve not only as lawmaking bodies but also as institutions responsible for scrutinizing the actions of the executive branch. Effective oversight ensures that governments remain accountable to elected representatives and that public authority is exercised transparently and in accordance with constitutional principles.

In Pakistan, the Parliament of Pakistan is a bicameral legislature consisting of the National Assembly and the Senate. The constitutional framework governing parliamentary authority is primarily defined in Articles 50 to 89 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan (1973). These provisions outline the composition, powers, procedures, and legislative functions of Parliament, establishing it as the principal forum for national representation and democratic deliberation.

The National Assembly, as the lower house, plays the primary role in forming the federal government. Under Article 91, the Prime Minister is elected by the members of the National Assembly and must maintain the confidence of the majority of the house to remain in office. This constitutional requirement establishes the principle that the executive branch remains politically accountable to Parliament. Through parliamentary debates, motions, and votes of confidence, elected representatives are able to scrutinize government policies and actions.

The Senate, as the upper house, represents Pakistan's federating units and provides an additional layer of legislative review and oversight. Although the Senate does not directly determine the formation of the

federal government, it plays an important role in reviewing legislation, raising public policy concerns, and ensuring that provincial perspectives are reflected in national decision-making.

A key mechanism through which parliamentary oversight is exercised is the system of standing committees. Parliamentary committees are responsible for reviewing legislation, examining the performance of ministries, and investigating issues related to public administration. Committees have the authority to summon government officials, request documents, and hold hearings on matters within their jurisdiction. This committee system allows for more detailed policy scrutiny than is typically possible during plenary sessions of Parliament.

Among the most significant oversight institutions is the Public Accounts Committee (PAC), which reviews the audit reports prepared by the Auditor General of Pakistan under Article 168 of the Constitution. The PAC examines government expenditures, identifies irregularities in financial management, and recommends corrective actions to strengthen fiscal accountability and institutional transparency. Through this process, Parliament plays a direct role in monitoring the utilization of public funds by the executive branch. Importantly, the chairmanship of the PAC has traditionally been entrusted to a member from the opposition, reflecting Pakistan's parliamentary commitment to bipartisan oversight and democratic checks and balances within the governance framework.

Parliamentary oversight is further supported by mechanisms such as question hour sessions, adjournment motions, calling attention notices, and parliamentary inquiries, which allow members of Parliament to raise issues of public concern and demand explanations from government officials. These tools enable legislators to hold ministers accountable and ensure that government actions remain subject to democratic scrutiny.

Recent constitutional reforms in Pakistan have introduced the establishment of a Constitutional Court, representing an important institutional development in the country's governance framework. The creation of a specialized court for constitutional adjudication reflects a broader international practice where dedicated courts interpret constitutional provisions, resolve institutional disputes, and safeguard fundamental rights.

Traditionally, constitutional interpretation in Pakistan has been carried out by the Supreme Court of Pakistan and the High Courts, which exercise judicial review under Articles 184(3) and 199 of the Constitution. However, the growing complexity of constitutional litigation and institutional disputes has led to calls for a specialized forum focused exclusively on constitutional matters.

The Constitutional Court is intended to handle cases involving constitutional interpretation, disputes between state institutions, and challenges related to the protection of fundamental rights. By concentrating constitutional review within a dedicated institution, the reform aims to improve the consistency of constitutional jurisprudence and strengthen the separation of powers among the executive, legislature, and judiciary.

From a governance perspective, the court is expected to function as a guardian of the Constitution by ensuring that legislation and executive actions remain consistent with constitutional principles. The effectiveness of this new institution, however, will depend on the independence of its judges, transparent appointment processes, and public confidence in its impartiality.

For the Freedom Report, the establishment of the Constitutional Court represents a notable institutional reform with the potential to strengthen constitutional governance and enhance oversight of state authority. Its long-term impact on political freedom will depend on how effectively it operates in practice.

Despite the presence of these mechanisms, the effectiveness of parliamentary oversight in Pakistan has varied over time. Factors such as political polarization, limited legislative resources, irregular committee meetings, and executive dominance in legislative processes can sometimes constrain Parliament's ability to perform its oversight functions effectively. Strengthening parliamentary research capacity, enhancing committee effectiveness, and ensuring greater transparency in legislative proceedings remain important priorities for improving democratic accountability.

3.5 Local Government Autonomy

Local governments represent the closest level of governance to citizens and play a critical role in strengthening democratic participation and political freedom. By enabling communities to elect representatives at the municipal and district levels, local governments provide citizens with opportunities to influence decisions that directly affect their daily lives. Effective local governance enhances accountability, improves service delivery, and promotes inclusive participation in the political process.

The constitutional foundation for local governance in Pakistan is established through Article 32 and Article 140A of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan (1973). Article 32 encourages the promotion of

local government institutions composed of elected representatives, while Article 140A requires each province to establish a system of local government and devolve political, administrative, and financial authority to elected representatives at the local level.

Following the 18th Constitutional Amendment in 2010, the responsibility for designing and implementing local government systems was largely devolved to the provinces. Consequently, each province has developed its own legislative framework for local governments, including laws governing metropolitan corporations, municipal committees, district councils, and union councils. These institutions are expected to manage community-level governance functions such as sanitation, urban planning, waste management, water supply, and local infrastructure development.

While strong constitutional provisions exist for local government in Pakistan, implementation has progressed at different paces across provinces due to varying administrative and regional priorities. Successive governments have continued efforts to strengthen local governance, recognizing its importance for effective service delivery and citizen participation. In many instances, elected local governments have not been operational for extended periods due to delays in conducting local elections or the dissolution of elected councils. During such periods, local administrative functions are typically managed by provincial bureaucracies or appointed administrators rather than elected representatives.

The absence of functioning local governments has significant implications for democratic participation. Without elected local councils, citizens are deprived of an important platform for engaging with governance at the grassroots level. Local governments normally provide accessible channels through which communities can influence decisions regarding neighborhood development, municipal services, and local public spending. When these institutions are inactive, opportunities for direct citizen participation in governance become limited.

Several structural factors contribute to the recurring gaps in local government implementation. One important factor is the reluctance of provincial political leadership to fully devolve authority to local representatives. Local governments can create alternative centers of political influence, potentially reducing the control of provincial administrations over local political and administrative processes. As a result, provincial governments have at times delayed local elections or restructured local government systems in ways that limit the autonomy of local institutions.

Financial and administrative constraints also affect the effectiveness of local governance. Many local governments lack independent revenue sources and remain heavily dependent on financial transfers from provincial governments. This fiscal dependence restricts their ability to independently implement development initiatives or manage local services effectively. In addition, administrative authority over local bureaucracies often remains centralized within provincial departments, which further reduces the operational autonomy of elected local bodies.

The impact of weak local governance extends beyond administrative challenges. When citizens lack meaningful opportunities to participate in governance at the community level, political engagement becomes concentrated at national and provincial levels, where decision-making processes are often more distant from everyday public concerns. This can limit democratic participation, weaken accountability, and reduce opportunities for new political leadership to emerge through local political institutions.

Furthermore, the absence of empowered local governments can negatively affect service delivery in critical areas such as sanitation, water management, urban infrastructure, and community planning. Local authorities are generally better positioned to understand and respond to the specific needs of communities. Without functioning local institutions, governance becomes more centralized and potentially less responsive to local priorities.

Strengthening local government systems would significantly expand opportunities for citizen participation, improve accountability in public administration, and reinforce the democratic foundations of Pakistan's political system.

3.6 Civil–Military Balance and Institutional Independence

The balance between civilian authority and military institutions is a central dimension of political freedom and democratic governance. In democratic systems, the armed forces operate under the authority of elected civilian leadership, ensuring that political decision-making remains accountable to citizens through representative institutions. Maintaining a stable civil–military balance is therefore essential for the functioning of democratic governance and the protection of constitutional freedoms.

Pakistan's constitutional framework establishes civilian oversight of the armed forces. Under Article 243 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan (1973), the President serves as the Supreme Commander

of the Armed Forces, while operational control and policy direction are exercised by the Federal Government through the Prime Minister and the Federal Cabinet. This arrangement reflects the constitutional principle that national defense institutions remain subordinate to civilian authority.

At the same time, Pakistan's governance structure has continuously evolved to effectively respond to national security priorities and economic challenges while maintaining institutional stability and public service delivery. Recent institutional developments, including the establishment of the Special Investment Facilitation Council (SIFC) and constitutional reforms, have strengthened coordination between civilian leadership and national institutions in addressing strategic economic and security priorities. These frameworks have enhanced policy continuity, improved investor confidence, and supported a more integrated approach to national development and governance.

The SIFC, for instance, was created as a high-level coordination platform designed to accelerate investment, facilitate large-scale development initiatives, and improve inter-institutional coordination. The council brings together civilian policymakers, economic institutions, and military leadership to streamline decision-making on strategic projects. Within this framework, the armed forces contribute logistical capacity, administrative support, and institutional coordination in areas related to national development and investment facilitation.

Similarly, the evolving role of the Chief of Defence Staff reflects the government's broader commitment to strengthening institutional coordination, enhancing strategic coherence across Pakistan's defence architecture, and ensuring more effective national security planning in support of long-term stability and development. By improving coordination among the services and aligning defense planning with national policy objectives, this institutional role aims to enhance the effectiveness of national security management.

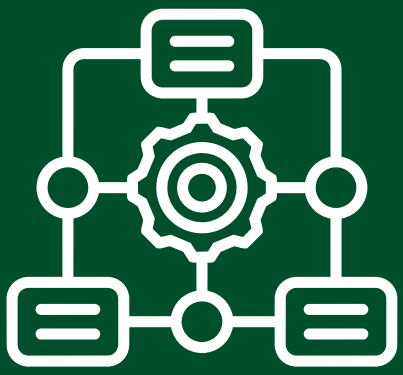
These developments reflect an effort to distribute certain governance responsibilities across institutional actors in order to address complex national challenges, particularly those related to economic stabilization, investment promotion, and national security management. Proponents argue that such coordination mechanisms improve administrative efficiency and enable more effective implementation of strategic initiatives.

At the same time, Pakistan's governance framework has increasingly reflected a collaborative institutional approach in which civilian and security institutions coordinate closely on matters relating to national stability, development, crisis management, and strategic policymaking. Such cooperation has often been viewed as important in addressing complex security, economic, and administrative challenges facing the country. Within this framework, the constitutional structure continues to place political authority and policymaking under elected civilian leadership, while institutional coordination mechanisms aim to support effective implementation and national cohesion. Continued emphasis on transparency, institutional harmony, and constitutional responsibilities remains important for strengthening governance effectiveness and public confidence in state institutions.

Pakistan's civil–military relationship has also been shaped by regional security dynamics and historical experiences. The Marka-e-Haq conflict with India on May 7, 2025 demonstrated the operational role of the armed forces in defending national sovereignty and responding to security threats. Likewise, continuing instability in neighboring Afghanistan and recent cross-border security engagements have reinforced the strategic importance of defense institutions in managing regional security challenges.

Historically, Pakistan experienced periods of direct military rule during 1958–1971, 1977–1988, and 1999–2008, during which military governments replaced elected administrations. Since the restoration of electoral democracy in 2008, however, Pakistan has largely maintained a pattern of civilian-led governments formed through electoral processes. The continued functioning of parliamentary institutions and regular elections has contributed to strengthening democratic continuity.

Beyond civil–military relations, institutional independence also includes the functioning of key governance bodies such as the judiciary, the Election Commission of Pakistan, parliamentary oversight committees, and accountability institutions. The credibility of democratic governance depends on the ability of these institutions to operate independently, uphold constitutional principles, and perform their functions without undue political influence.



Chapter 4:

Civil Liberties

Civil liberties form the moral and constitutional backbone of any democratic society. They define the space within which individuals can think, speak, believe, organize, and participate without fear of coercion or repression. In Pakistan's context, civil liberties are not merely legal entitlements enshrined in the Constitution, they are lived experiences shaped by political culture, institutional behavior, regulatory frameworks, and societal norms.

This chapter examines the state of civil liberties in Pakistan through a multi-dimensional lens, assessing both the constitutional guarantees and the realities of implementation. While Pakistan's Constitution provides robust protections, including freedoms of speech, religion, association, and access to information, these rights often operate within a complex environment marked by security concerns, political polarization, regulatory ambiguities, and evolving digital landscapes.

Over the past decade, the discourse on civil liberties in Pakistan has undergone significant transformation. The rise of digital platforms has expanded avenues for expression while simultaneously introducing new forms of regulation and surveillance. Media ecosystems have diversified but also face pressures ranging from economic constraints to editorial influence. Civil society continues to play a vital role, yet its operational space has fluctuated in response to policy and administrative shifts.

Importantly, civil liberties must be understood not in isolation, but as interconnected freedoms. Restrictions in one domain, such as media or assembly, often have cascading effects on others, including political participation, academic inquiry, and minority protections. Similarly, the absence of effective local governance structures further constrains citizens' ability to exercise these freedoms at the grassroots level, limiting both voice and accountability.

This chapter therefore moves beyond a binary assessment of "free" or "not free" and instead presents a layered analysis of trends, constraints, and institutional responses. It evaluates the balance between state authority and individual freedoms, the role of judiciary and oversight bodies, and the impact of both formal regulations and informal practices.

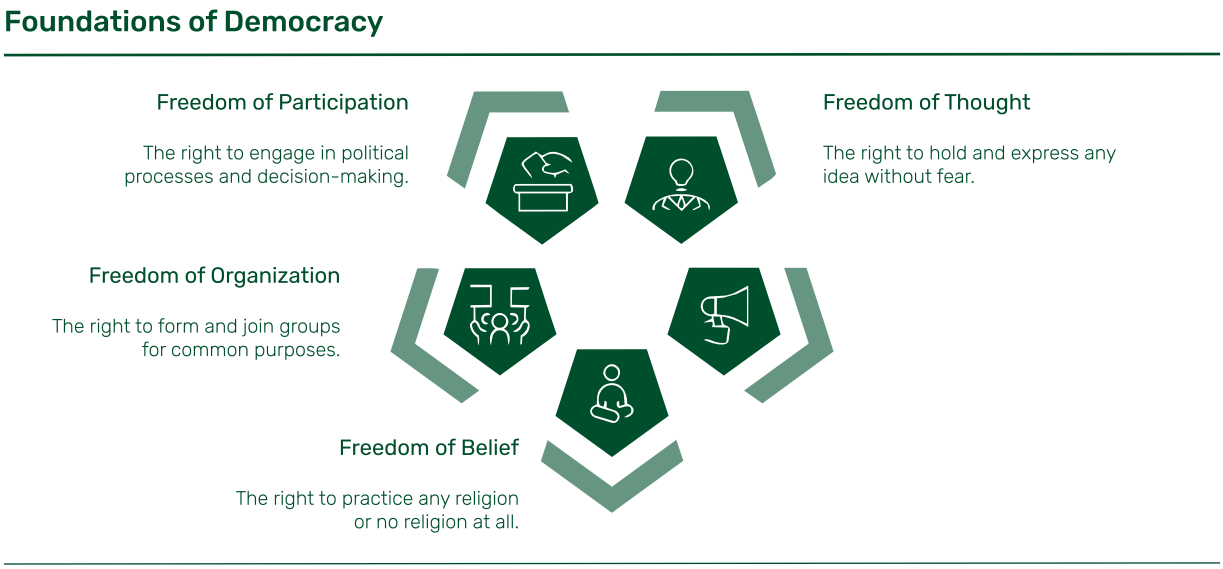


Figure : Foundations of Democracy, The Freedom Report 2026

4.1 Freedom of Expression

Freedom of expression is widely regarded as the cornerstone of all civil liberties. It enables individuals to articulate opinions, critique authority, exchange ideas, and participate meaningfully in public life. In Pakistan, this right is constitutionally guaranteed under Article 19, which affirms the freedom of speech and expression, subject to "reasonable restrictions" in the interest of national security, public order, decency, morality, and the integrity of the state.

While the constitutional framework provides a formal safeguard, the operational reality of freedom of expression reflects a more complex and evolving landscape. The interpretation and application of constitutional safeguards have evolved over time to maintain a balance between freedom of expression, public order, and national stability. This reflects the government's responsibility to protect democratic freedoms while ensuring that sensitive political, security-related, and institutional matters are managed in the broader public interest.

A critical but often misunderstood distinction must be made between freedom of expression as a universal right of citizens and the responsibility-bound expression of institutions such as media, academia, and other informed platforms. Freedom of expression remains a fundamental right of every citizen, allowing individuals to share opinions, concerns, and perspectives within a democratic framework. At the same time, institutions that shape public opinion, such as media organizations, policy platforms, and academic institutions, carry an important responsibility to ensure accuracy, balance, and constructive discourse. This balance supports both democratic openness and the broader public interest by promoting informed dialogue and social stability.

This distinction is frequently blurred in public discourse. When regulatory frameworks, editorial policies, or institutional guidelines impose constraints on how sensitive issues are reported or analyzed, these are often interpreted as a blanket suppression of public expression. In reality, such constraints are typically aimed at ensuring accuracy, preventing misinformation, managing national security risks, and maintaining social cohesion, rather than silencing the general population.

For example, coverage of national security operations or military engagements often requires media outlets to adhere to certain reporting protocols. While citizens may freely express opinions on such developments through personal platforms, media institutions are expected to avoid disseminating unverified information, operational details, or narratives that could compromise security. Similarly, in cases involving judicial

proceedings, responsible reporting standards require restraint to avoid influencing outcomes or undermining due process, constraints that do not apply in the same structured manner to individual citizens expressing personal views.

Another example can be seen in discussions around religious sensitivities. While individuals may engage in debate within legal boundaries, media organizations and academic institutions often adopt stricter editorial filters to prevent content that could incite unrest or violence. These institutional safeguards are designed not to curtail expression broadly, but to manage the scale and impact of expression when amplified through mass platforms.

The rise of digital platforms has further complicated this distinction. Social media has enabled individuals to function as both consumers and producers of information, blurring the line between personal expression and public influence. As a result, regulatory efforts targeting misinformation, hate speech, or harmful content are sometimes perceived as restrictions on freedom of expression, even when they are primarily aimed at high-impact dissemination channels rather than individual opinion.

Another dimension influencing freedom of expression is the prevalence of self-censorship. Journalists, academics, and public commentators often navigate an informal boundary of "acceptable discourse," shaped by perceived risks rather than explicit legal prohibitions. This phenomenon is particularly evident in discussions related to civil-military relations, judicial matters, religious sensitivities, and regional geopolitics, especially in the context of friendly nations. The result is not necessarily the absence of expression, but a narrowing of its scope.

The role of state institutions and regulatory bodies also remains central. Authorities responsible for information management and digital governance have increasingly asserted their influence in shaping narratives. While these interventions are often framed as necessary for maintaining stability and countering disinformation, they raise important questions about transparency, accountability, and due process.

At the societal level, freedom of expression is further mediated by cultural norms and collective sensitivities. Issues related to religion, identity, and national ideology can trigger strong public reactions, sometimes leading to social pressure, legal action, or, in extreme cases, threats to personal safety. This environment creates additional constraints, particularly for marginalized voices, minority communities, and dissenting perspectives.

Alongside ongoing reforms, Pakistan continues to demonstrate strong resilience in the sphere of public discourse. The country's vibrant digital youth population, independent content creators, and active civil society contribute to a dynamic exchange of ideas. Public discussion remains diverse and robust, particularly on issues such as governance, economic policy, and social development, reflecting the strength of democratic engagement and the government's continued commitment to participatory dialogue.

In assessing freedom of expression, it is therefore essential to distinguish between formal rights, institutional responsibilities, and lived realities. While the legal architecture affirms the principle for all citizens, its structured application across different domains reflects varying levels of responsibility and impact. Misinterpreting institutional restraint as a universal restriction risks oversimplifying a nuanced issue and can obscure the need for both freedom and responsibility to coexist.

In an increasingly competitive information environment, sections of the media have developed a fast-paced reporting culture that often prioritizes immediacy and audience engagement. While this has expanded access to information and strengthened public awareness, it can at times encourage sensationalism, where complex issues are presented in an overly dramatic or polarized manner. This tendency may influence public perception, deepen social divisions, and shift attention away from balanced, fact-based discussion. Strengthening editorial standards, professional ethics, and responsible journalism remains essential to ensuring that media continues to serve as a constructive pillar of democratic governance and informed public discourse.

The future of this freedom will depend on Pakistan's continued efforts to maintain a balanced approach between national security priorities and democratic openness. Ongoing improvements in legal clarity, institutional safeguards, and responsible communication practices can further strengthen public confidence and expand constructive space for expression. At the same time, fostering tolerance for diverse viewpoints within a framework of stability and national interest will remain essential for sustaining democratic progress in the years ahead.

4.2 Freedom of Media

Freedom of media is a critical pillar of democratic governance, serving as both a conduit for information and a mechanism for accountability. In Pakistan, the media landscape is one of the most vibrant and diverse

in the region, comprising television networks, print journalism, radio, and an expanding digital ecosystem. This plurality has enabled a wide range of perspectives to emerge, contributing to public discourse on governance, economy, and social issues.

Constitutionally, media freedom is derived from the broader guarantee of freedom of expression under Article 19. However, as with expression, it is subject to "reasonable restrictions," which have significant implications for how media institutions operate. Unlike individual expression, media operates at scale and influence, making it both powerful and consequential. As a result, it is subject to a more structured regulatory and operational environment.

A defining characteristic of media freedom in Pakistan is the tension between editorial independence and regulatory oversight. Institutions such as the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) play a central role in licensing, monitoring, and, at times, sanctioning broadcast media. While regulatory frameworks are designed to ensure ethical standards, prevent misinformation, and maintain public order, concerns are often raised regarding consistency, transparency, and the scope of regulatory discretion.

Economic pressures also significantly shape media freedom. The financial sustainability of media organizations, particularly their dependence on advertising revenue, including government advertising, can influence editorial priorities. This creates a subtle but important dynamic where economic considerations intersect with editorial decision-making, potentially affecting the independence of reporting.

Another key dimension is the phenomenon of informal constraints and editorial caution. Media organizations often operate within perceived boundaries, particularly when covering sensitive subjects such as civil-military relations, high-level political developments, judicial matters, and national security. This environment fosters a degree of self-regulation, where decisions about what to report, and how, are influenced not only by formal rules but also by risk assessment and institutional experience.

Pakistan has made significant legislative progress in strengthening journalist protection, particularly through the Protection of Journalists and Media Professionals Act, 2021, and its landmark amendments approved unanimously by the Senate in July 2025. These amendments further reinforced safeguards for journalists by expanding legal protections related to security, welfare, salaries, health, privacy, and the non-disclosure of sources, while also strengthening penalties for attacks, violence, and obstruction against media professionals. The revised framework supports the establishment of an independent commission designed to provide journalists with a more direct and institutional mechanism for addressing grievances, reducing procedural barriers and improving access to protection.

Provincial mechanisms, such as the Sindh Commission for the Protection of Journalists and Media Professionals, have also contributed to strengthening the protection ecosystem. At present, complaint registration and case management remain distributed across multiple institutions, including the Ministry of Human Rights, the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, PEMRA, the Press Council of Pakistan, and provincial bodies. As a result, a unified national complaint registry is still evolving. Available monitoring indicates that numerous cases related to threats, harassment, and professional safety concerns are reported annually, reflecting both the active use of institutional channels and the government's continued commitment to improving legal safeguards, institutional coordination, and protections for media professionals across Pakistan.

A significant and increasingly influential factor in the media freedom landscape is the evolution and application of the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA), 2016, particularly following its 2025 amendments. These amendments have expanded the scope and enforcement mechanisms of the law, especially in relation to digital content, misinformation, and the regulation of online platforms.

The 2025 amendments introduced several notable changes:

- **Expanded Definitions of Harmful Content:** Broader categorization of "false information," "anti-state content," and "defamation of institutions," allowing authorities greater interpretive scope.
- **Enhanced Enforcement Powers:** Regulatory and investigative bodies were granted stronger authority to remove content, block platforms, and initiate proceedings without lengthy procedural delays.
- **Increased Penalties:** Stricter fines and potential custodial sentences for violations related to digital expression, particularly for repeat offenses.
- **Platform Accountability Provisions:** Greater obligations placed on social media platforms and digital publishers to comply with local regulations, including data sharing and content moderation requirements.
- **Fast-Track Complaint Mechanisms:** Introduction of expedited processes for lodging and addressing complaints related to online content.

While these amendments were positioned as necessary to combat misinformation, cyber harassment, and digital threats, they have also generated significant debate within media and policy circles. Concerns have been raised regarding the breadth of definitions, potential overlap with defamation laws, and the scope for discretionary enforcement, particularly when applied to journalistic content or political commentary.

In recent years, the increased use of digital platforms has led to greater regulatory attention under the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA), particularly in cases involving misinformation, cyber harassment, defamation, and content considered harmful to public order or institutional stability. This reflects the government's broader responsibility to ensure that digital spaces remain safe, accountable, and protected from misuse.

During periods of political unrest or security operations, media outlets may limit live coverage or avoid broadcasting unverified developments to prevent panic or misinformation. Similarly, in reporting on religiously sensitive issues, editorial teams often exercise heightened caution to avoid triggering social unrest. These decisions, while sometimes perceived as restrictions, reflect the institutional responsibility of media to balance public interest with societal stability.

Cases involving journalists, digital content creators, and social media commentators have generally arisen in the context of concerns related to unverified information, online harassment, or the spread of content with potential legal or security implications. The government maintains that such measures are intended to uphold responsible digital communication, protect citizens from harmful content, and preserve institutional integrity while balancing constitutional freedoms and due process protections.

These developments have contributed to an environment where digital media actors exercise heightened caution, particularly when engaging in investigative or critical discourse online. Importantly, this does not equate to a complete restriction of media freedom, but it does indicate an evolving regulatory approach where digital expression is increasingly subject to structured legal oversight.

It is important to recognize the distinction between individual freedom of expression and the broader responsibilities of media institutions. While freedom of expression is a fundamental right of every citizen, media organizations serve a larger public function as trusted platforms of information and public awareness. Their role extends beyond opinion-sharing to ensuring accuracy, verification, context, and responsible reporting, which are essential for protecting public interest, social harmony, and informed democratic discourse. Consequently, regulatory frameworks, editorial standards, and professional ethics within the media sector are intended to promote responsible dissemination of information, safeguard public interest, and ensure that reporting remains accurate, balanced, and constructive rather than allowing the spread of harmful misinformation or unnecessary social disruption.

For example, during periods of political unrest or security operations, media outlets may limit live coverage or avoid broadcasting unverified developments to prevent panic or misinformation. Similarly, in reporting on religiously sensitive issues, editorial teams often exercise heightened caution to avoid triggering social unrest. These decisions, while sometimes perceived as restrictions, reflect the institutional responsibility of media to balance public interest with societal stability.

The rise of digital media and independent online platforms has significantly expanded the media landscape, creating faster and more diverse channels of information through digital journalism, vloggers, and social media commentators. This has strengthened public access to information and increased civic engagement, particularly among younger audiences. However, it has also introduced challenges related to misinformation, unverified reporting, and the absence of consistent editorial oversight.

In some cases, competitive pressure within the media industry has led to practices where information is circulated rapidly through copied tickers, shared newsroom feeds, and informal WhatsApp exchanges rather than through original reporting, field verification, and independent journalistic investigation. This can weaken professional standards and reduce the quality and credibility of news coverage. As a result, regulatory frameworks and professional ethics mechanisms continue to evolve to encourage responsible journalism, strengthen fact-checking, and ensure that digital freedom is balanced with accountability, accuracy, and public trust.

Safety and security of journalists remain an important concern. While Pakistan has a large and active journalist community, instances of harassment, intimidation, and threats have been reported, particularly in relation to investigative reporting or coverage of sensitive issues. Such conditions contribute to a broader

climate of caution and can impact the depth and scope of journalistic inquiry.

At the same time, there are strong indicators of resilience within Pakistan's media ecosystem. Investigative journalism continues to highlight important public issues, talk shows remain active forums for debate on governance and policy, and digital platforms have expanded the reach of diverse voices across society. The media continues to play a central role in shaping public opinion, strengthening civic awareness, and supporting institutional accountability.

In assessing media freedom, it is therefore important to move beyond simplistic binaries and recognize the complex environment in which media operates. The question is not merely whether media is "free" or "restricted," but how freedom is exercised responsibly within a framework of law, professional ethics, public interest, and national stability. Regulatory structures, economic realities, evolving digital governance frameworks, and broader societal sensitivities all contribute to shaping a media environment that seeks to balance democratic openness with accountability, institutional integrity, and responsible communication.

This balance between freedom and responsibility is not unique to Pakistan; it is reflected across major democracies and governance systems worldwide. In Europe, countries such as Germany have implemented strong digital content regulations through laws like the Network Enforcement Act (NetzDG), requiring social media platforms to remove clearly illegal content, hate speech, and harmful misinformation within strict timelines to protect public order and democratic stability. France has also introduced legal mechanisms during election periods that allow rapid intervention against deliberate disinformation campaigns aimed at protecting electoral integrity.

In the United Kingdom, while press freedom remains strongly protected, media regulation operates through institutions such as Ofcom and the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO), which ensure broadcasting standards, prevent harmful content, and uphold professional ethics. The UK's Online Safety Act further strengthens oversight of digital platforms to address harmful online content, misinformation, and child safety concerns while maintaining freedom of expression.

In the Americas, the United States maintains robust constitutional protections for free speech under the First Amendment, yet broadcast media remains regulated by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), while defamation laws, national security concerns, and platform accountability debates continue to shape the boundaries of expression. In Brazil, judicial oversight and platform regulation have increasingly focused on combating disinformation and protecting democratic institutions, particularly during election cycles.

In the Middle East, the United Arab Emirates has adopted comprehensive media laws that regulate digital platforms, social media influencers, and online advertising to preserve public interest, national identity, and social harmony. Licensing requirements, penalties for misinformation, and standards for responsible media practices reflect a governance model where freedom operates alongside strong accountability mechanisms.

In South Asia, India has also expanded its digital governance frameworks through the Information Technology Rules and broadcast regulations that address misinformation, national security concerns, and platform accountability. While public debate around these laws continues, the broader objective remains the maintenance of institutional stability and responsible communication in a highly diverse and politically active society.

Similarly, in ASEAN countries such as Singapore, the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA) was introduced to address misinformation and preserve institutional trust. Indonesia and Malaysia have also strengthened cyber and media regulations to manage online content and maintain public order.

Australia presents another relevant example, where the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) regulates broadcasting standards and digital content, while recent legislation has increased platform accountability for misinformation, harmful content, and the financial sustainability of journalism through measures such as the News Media Bargaining Code.

Looking ahead, Pakistan's evolving digital media landscape is expected to benefit from a more structured and coordinated regulatory framework. The proposed establishment of the Social Media Protection and Regulatory Authority (SMPRA) under the PECA amendments is intended to improve the management, facilitation, and oversight of social media platforms, while creating clearer mechanisms for addressing online complaints, harmful digital content, misinformation, and platform accountability. The initiative reflects the government's broader objective of ensuring a safer, more organized, and efficient digital communication environment in line with emerging global regulatory trends.

At the same time, the continued strengthening of media freedom in Pakistan will depend on a balanced and forward-looking approach that combines regulatory clarity with institutional responsibility. Key priorities include enhancing transparency in regulatory processes, ensuring the safety and professional protection

of journalists, improving the implementation and understanding of digital laws, supporting the long-term sustainability of media institutions, and encouraging higher professional and ethical standards within journalism. Equally important is promoting greater public awareness regarding the distinction between responsible communication, misinformation, and unrestricted digital expression, ensuring that discussions surrounding media freedom remain constructive, informed, and institutionally balanced.

4.3 Freedom of Assembly and Association

Freedom of assembly and association are essential components of a functioning democracy, enabling citizens to organize collectively, express views, and participate in public life beyond the ballot box. In Pakistan, these freedoms are constitutionally guaranteed under Article 16 (freedom of assembly) and Article 17 (freedom of association), which provide citizens the right to gather peacefully and to form associations or political parties within the framework of public order, national integrity, and constitutional responsibility.

The exercise of these freedoms must be accompanied by civic responsibility and respect for the rights of others. While peaceful assembly and association are fundamental democratic rights, unlawful protests, road blockages, violent demonstrations, and the misuse of public spaces can disrupt daily life, economic activity, and public safety. In such circumstances, the state has a responsibility to ensure that public order and citizen mobility are protected.

To manage these situations, the government may apply administrative measures such as Section 144 of the Criminal Procedure Code, which empowers local administrations to temporarily regulate or restrict public gatherings in designated areas. This provision serves as a preventive mechanism during periods of heightened tension, security concerns, or potential public disorder. Its use is intended to maintain law and order, protect citizens' safety, and ensure the smooth functioning of public life while balancing democratic participation with social stability and effective governance.

Over the last decade, Pakistan has witnessed increased political mobilization, public engagement, protests, and demonstrations, reflecting the country's active and evolving democratic and political landscape. These developments have tested the state's approach to managing assembly rights. In many instances, authorities have imposed restrictions on gatherings, citing security threats, risks of violence, or disruption to public life. These restrictions have included:

- Temporary bans on public gatherings in major urban centers
- Denial or conditional approval of protest permits
- Deployment of law enforcement to disperse assemblies
- Restrictions on movement, including road blockades and transport controls

While such measures are often justified on grounds of maintaining public order, critics argue that blanket or prolonged restrictions may undermine the spirit of constitutional freedoms, particularly when applied unevenly or without transparent criteria.

The right to association, particularly in the context of political parties and civil society organizations, also reflects a mixed landscape. Pakistan maintains a multi-party political system, and political parties continue to operate, mobilize supporters, and contest elections. However, the operational environment for political activity can vary significantly depending on the prevailing political climate. Administrative actions, legal proceedings, and regulatory scrutiny have, at times, influenced the ability of certain parties or groups to organize and mobilize effectively.

Civil society organizations (CSOs), including non-governmental organizations and advocacy groups, play a vital role in promoting social development, human rights, and policy dialogue. However, their operational space is shaped by registration requirements, funding regulations, and administrative oversight. While many organizations continue to function actively, others have faced challenges related to approvals, renewals, and compliance procedures, which can affect their ability to operate freely and sustainably.

An important emerging dimension of assembly and association is the digital sphere. Social media platforms have become significant tools for public engagement, civic mobilization, and community coordination, often transforming online discussions into physical gatherings and collective action. This has expanded democratic participation and strengthened citizen engagement, particularly among younger populations.

At the same time, the rapid spread of digital mobilization highlights the need for responsible use of online platforms to prevent misinformation, unlawful gatherings, and activities that may disrupt public order. Regulatory responses continue to evolve to ensure that digital spaces support constructive civic participation while maintaining social stability, public safety, and institutional harmony.

Another critical factor is the use of force and law enforcement practices in managing assemblies. While peaceful protests are constitutionally protected, instances of confrontation between demonstrators and law enforcement have been reported. The proportionality of response, use of crowd control measures, and protection of participants' rights remain important considerations in evaluating the overall environment of assembly freedoms.

It is important to distinguish between peaceful assembly as a constitutional right and unlawful or violent gatherings that fall outside the scope of legal protection. Democratic societies must protect the right of citizens to protest, organize, and express dissent, while also ensuring that public safety, economic continuity, and the rights of other citizens are not undermined. The governance challenge lies in ensuring that regulatory measures remain targeted, proportionate, and time-bound, rather than broad restrictions that may unnecessarily limit legitimate civic participation.

Pakistan has witnessed some of the largest and most complex public mobilizations in the world, ranging from political sit-ins and religious demonstrations to issue-based protest movements. Events such as the Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) protests and the recent Baloch Yakjehti Committee (BYC) demonstrations illustrate the scale and sensitivity of managing mass public gatherings. In many such cases, despite significant disruption to public life, road networks, and economic activity, the state has often exercised considerable restraint and sought negotiated resolution before the use of administrative or law-enforcement measures. This reflects an institutional preference for maintaining public order through dialogue and controlled response rather than escalation.

The response to such protests also demonstrates the state's responsibility to balance constitutional freedoms with law and order obligations. While peaceful protest remains protected, violence, vandalism, prolonged blockades, and actions that threaten national security or public safety require administrative intervention. Measures such as temporary restrictions, negotiated dispersal, and legal enforcement are therefore intended to preserve both democratic participation and the broader stability necessary for effective governance.

In assessing freedom of assembly and association in Pakistan, the issue is not the absence of legal guarantees, but the conditions under which these rights are exercised. The interplay between security considerations, administrative discretion, political dynamics, and institutional capacity shapes the lived reality of these freedoms.

Going forward, strengthening this domain will require clearer guidelines on the use of public order laws, improved transparency in permitting processes, safeguards against arbitrary restrictions, and enhanced training for law enforcement in managing peaceful assemblies. Equally important is fostering a political and societal culture that recognizes peaceful dissent and collective organization as integral to democratic resilience, rather than as threats to stability.

Table 4.3A: Political Rallies, Protests, Boycotts, and Public Mobilizations in Pakistan (2025–2026)

Date / Period	Category	Event / Activity	Organizing Entity	Nature of Activity	Geographic Spread	Government Response	Observations / Impact
Jan–Mar 2025	Political Protest	Post-election protest movement	Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI)	Rallies, sit-ins, protest marches	Punjab, KP, Islamabad	Section 144 imposed; arrests; mobility restrictions	Major test of opposition's assembly rights
Feb 5, 2025	Government Observed Day	Kashmir Solidarity Day	Government of Pakistan	State-led rallies, public gatherings	Nationwide	Fully facilitated	Demonstrates state-backed mobilization
Mar–Apr 2025	Political Mobilization	Stability and governance rallies	Pakistan Muslim League (N) (PML-N)	Public meetings, organized gatherings	Punjab, Islamabad	Facilitated through permits	Reflects differential administrative ease
Apr 2025	Boycott Call	Opposition boycott narrative (local electoral processes)	Multi-party opposition	Political boycott campaigns	Nationwide	No formal restriction	Impact on participation narrative
May 1, 2025	Labor Strike	International Labour Day protests	Trade unions	Rallies, labor rights protests	Nationwide	Permitted with monitoring	Institutionalized assembly space

May–Jun 2025	Religious Protest	Issue-based mobilization (religious sensitivities)	Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP)	Sit-ins, road blockades	Punjab, Karachi	Temporary bans; negotiations	High-pressure street mobilization
Jul 2025	Civil Society Protest	Media freedom demonstrations	Journalists' bodies, NGOs	Press club protests, rallies	Islamabad, Karachi, Lahore	Allowed but monitored	Indicates constrained but active civic space
Aug 14, 2025	Government Observed Day	Independence Day celebrations	Government of Pakistan	Public events, rallies	Nationwide	Fully facilitated	High participation, symbolic unity
Sept 6, 2025	Government Observed Day	Defence Day	Government of Pakistan	State-led events, parades	Nationwide	Fully facilitated	National narrative consolidation
Oct 2025	Professional Protest	Lawyers' and doctors' protests	Professional associations	Sit-ins, service boycotts	Provincial capitals	Negotiations; occasional dispersal	Sector-specific grievances
Nov 2025	Digital >> Physical Protest	Social media-led protest calls	Youth groups, political supporters	Flash protests	Urban centers	Monitoring; preventive detentions	Rise of hybrid mobilization
Dec 2025	Strike / Shutdown	Traders' shutter-down strike	Business associations	Market closures	Karachi, Lahore, nationwide	Mixed response	Economic leverage on policy
Jan–Feb 2026	Political Protest	Renewed opposition rallies	Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI)	Public gatherings, protest calls	KP, Punjab	Restrictions in major cities	Continued contestation of political space
Feb 5, 2026	Government Observed Day	Kashmir Solidarity Day	Government of Pakistan	Nationwide rallies	Nationwide	Fully facilitated	Repetition of state-supported assembly
Mar 2026	Civil Society / Student Protest	Student and rights-based mobilization	Student groups, NGOs	Demonstrations, campus protests	Universities, urban centers	Institutional controls	Emerging youth political engagement

4.4 Freedom of Religion and Belief

Freedom of religion and belief is constitutionally recognized in Pakistan; however, its practical expression operates within a defined legal, social, and cultural context. While citizens are guaranteed the right to profess and practice their faith, certain aspects, such as changing one's religion, remain sensitive and are not commonly exercised in the public domain, reflecting broader societal norms and legal interpretations.

Freedom of religion is protected under Article 20, which guarantees every citizen the right to profess, practice, and propagate religion, and Article 22, which safeguards individuals from being compelled to receive religious instruction other than their own. Additionally, Article 36 obligates the state to protect the legitimate rights and interests of minorities.

Pakistan's constitutional and governance framework provides specific protections for minority communities and their religious practices, reflecting the state's commitment to religious inclusion and social harmony. Special security and administrative arrangements are regularly made during major religious events such as Christmas, Easter, Diwali, Holi, Baisakhi, and other minority community festivals to ensure peaceful observance and public safety. These measures often include dedicated security deployments, facilitation by local administrations, and coordination with religious community leaders to support uninterrupted worship and celebration.

At the state level, there is no formal policy of religious discrimination, and constitutional protections guarantee equal citizenship, freedom of worship, and the right to manage religious institutions for all recognized communities. Minority representation in parliament through reserved seats, dedicated commissions, and institutional mechanisms further reflects the state's effort to ensure participation and protection within the national framework.

State functionaries, including senior government officials, ministers, parliamentarians, and public representatives, regularly attend and felicitate minority religious events as a gesture of national solidarity and inclusion. Official messages on occasions such as Christmas, Diwali, Easter, Holi, Gurpurab, and other

religious celebrations reinforce the principle that religious diversity is part of Pakistan's national identity. These symbolic and administrative measures collectively demonstrate the government's continued commitment to promoting interfaith harmony and protecting the rights of all religious communities.

A defining characteristic of Pakistan's religious freedom framework is the simultaneous presence of constitutional protections alongside religion-specific legal provisions. Blasphemy laws, in particular, carry profound legal and societal weight. While these laws are designed to safeguard religious sentiments and preserve public order, their enforcement has prompted ongoing debate around due process, standards of evidence, and the risk of misuse. Accusations under such provisions often extend beyond the legal domain, triggering wider social repercussions such as community pressure, stigmatization, and, in certain instances, concerns for individual safety.

Religious Category	Estimated Total Number Across Pakistan	Notes
Mosques	600,000+	According to Pakistan's first Economic Census (2023), officially released in 2025, Pakistan has over 600,000 mosques nationwide
Madrassas / Religious Seminaries	36,000+	Recorded alongside mosques in the Economic Census
Churches	1,500–2,000 (estimated)	Includes Catholic, Protestant, Anglican, and independent churches across all provinces
Hindu Mandirs	350–400+	Includes major functioning temples and registered Hindu worship places, along with heritage temples
Sikh Gurdwaras	150–200+	Includes major active and heritage Gurdwaras, though only a smaller number are regularly functional
Ahmadiyya Places of Worship	500+ (estimated)	Includes prayer centers primarily serving the Ahmadiyya community, with significant presence in Punjab, especially Rabwah (Chenab Nagar)
Shrines / Dargahs	3,000+ major shrines	Includes major Sufi shrines and thousands of local mazars across provinces
Buddhist Sites / Monasteries	100+ heritage sites	Primarily archaeological and heritage sites rather than active places of worship
Jain Temples	20+ heritage sites	Mostly historic structures, with limited active worship
Parsi Fire Temples	5–8	Mostly concentrated in Karachi and a few urban centers
Bahá'í Centers	Several community centers	Present across major cities in smaller numbers
Kalash Sacred Sites	Multiple traditional sites	Concentrated in Chitral's Kalash Valleys
Other Indigenous / Tribal Worship Sites	Multiple local shrines and sacred spaces	Found in Gilgit-Baltistan, Interior Sindh, Tribal Areas, and Chitral

Pakistan maintains one of the world's most extensive religious infrastructure networks, with over 600,000 mosques, more than 36,000 religious seminaries, thousands of shrines, and places of worship for Christian, Hindu, Sikh, Ahmadiyya, Parsi, Bahá'í, Kalash, and other minority communities. This diverse religious landscape reflects the country's deep spiritual heritage and its constitutional recognition of religious freedom, minority rights, and the protection of places of worship across faith traditions.

The case of the Ahmadiyya community remains particularly distinct, as constitutional provisions and legal frameworks place specific restrictions on the public expression of their religious identity. This creates a differentiated experience of religious freedom within the broader minority landscape.

Another important dimension is the societal context in which religion operates. Religion holds an important place in Pakistan's social and cultural fabric, influencing both public and private spheres of life. While this fosters strong community bonds and shared values, it can also lead to heightened sensitivities around religious discourse. Public expression that is perceived as disrespectful or controversial may trigger strong reactions, both socially and institutionally.

The role of the state in managing religious harmony is therefore critical. Authorities often take preventive measures to maintain public order during religious events, sectarian tensions, or sensitive periods. These measures may include restrictions on gatherings, monitoring of speech, and security deployments around places of worship. While such actions are aimed at ensuring stability, they also reflect the delicate balance between protecting religious freedom and maintaining public order.

Figure 4.4A: Distribution of Population by Religion in Pakistan

Religion / Belief Group	Estimated Population Share (%)	Key Notes
Muslims (Total)	96.3%	Majority population; includes Sunni and Shia sects
Sunni	~85–90% (of Muslims)	Largest sect within Muslim population
Shia	~10–15% (of Muslims)	Significant minority within Muslim population
Christians	~1.6%	Concentrated in Punjab (urban & rural)
Hindus	~1.6%	Majority in Sindh, especially rural areas
Ahmadis	~0.2%	Constitutionally declared non-Muslim
Others (Sikhs, Parsis, Bahá'í, Kalasha, etc.)	~0.3%	Small but culturally significant communities

Sources: Pakistan Bureau of Statistics – Population Census 2017 (Final Results), Government of Pakistan – Population Census 2023 (Provisional Results), Pew Research Center – Religious Composition Studies & Estimates on Muslim Sects, World Bank – Pakistan Population Data (for total population validation)

Education and curriculum also influence the broader environment of religious belief. Efforts have been made in recent years to promote inclusivity and interfaith harmony within educational content, though implementation remains uneven across regions and institutions.

At the same time, there are positive indicators of coexistence and resilience. Interfaith initiatives, civil society engagement, and community-level cooperation continue to promote dialogue and mutual understanding. Religious festivals of minority communities are publicly recognized, and there are ongoing efforts to restore and preserve minority heritage sites.

In assessing freedom of religion and belief in Pakistan, it is important to distinguish between formal protections and practical realities. The constitutional framework is robust, but its implementation is influenced by legal complexities, administrative capacity, and societal attitudes.

Moving forward, strengthening this freedom will require a focus on consistent application of the rule of law, protection of vulnerable communities, judicial safeguards against misuse of sensitive legislation, and promotion of interfaith tolerance. Ensuring that all citizens, regardless of belief, can exercise their rights without fear is essential not only for social cohesion but also for Pakistan's democratic credibility and global standing.

4.5 Academic and Intellectual Freedom

Academic and intellectual freedom are essential to the development of knowledge, critical thinking, and innovation within a society. They encompass the ability of scholars, researchers, students, and institutions to pursue inquiry, express ideas, and disseminate knowledge without undue interference or restriction. In Pakistan, while there is no single constitutional article explicitly dedicated to academic freedom, it is implicitly protected through the broader guarantees of freedom of expression (Article 19) and the right to education (Article 25A).

Pakistan hosts a large and growing higher education sector, with universities, research institutions, and think tanks contributing to academic discourse across disciplines. The establishment and expansion of institutions under the Higher Education Commission of Pakistan (HEC) has significantly increased access to higher education, research funding, and academic collaboration. This expansion has created a more vibrant intellectual environment, particularly in fields such as social sciences, technology, and public policy.

However, academic freedom in practice operates within a structured institutional and socio-political context, where both formal and informal constraints influence the scope of inquiry and expression.

One of the defining features of academic life in Pakistan is the presence of institutional oversight and administrative controls. Universities are governed by regulatory frameworks that shape curriculum design, research priorities, and faculty conduct. While these mechanisms are intended to maintain academic

standards and institutional coherence, they can also influence the direction and boundaries of research, particularly in politically or socially sensitive areas.

Across Pakistan's universities, there are no formal restrictions on the selection of thesis topics, and campuses broadly promote open discussion on political and public policy issues. While engagement with certain sensitive subjects, such as civil-military relations, religion, and national security, may at times be approached with caution, this largely reflects an awareness of the wider societal and contextual landscape rather than any institutional limitation. Overall, the academic environment continues to support a healthy exchange of ideas, with scholars and students actively contributing through research papers, journals, campus media, and other platforms, reinforcing a dynamic and evolving culture of intellectual discourse.

The role of campus governance and student activity also shapes academic freedom. Student unions, historically a significant force in political and intellectual engagement, have experienced periods of restriction and revival. While there have been efforts to reintroduce student representation, campus-level regulations and administrative oversight continue to influence the extent of student-led discourse and mobilization.

Another important dimension is the relationship between academia and the state. Public universities, which constitute a large portion of Pakistan's higher education system, are dependent on government funding and oversight. This relationship can impact institutional autonomy, particularly in areas such as appointments, research agendas, and policy engagement. Private universities often enjoy relatively greater operational flexibility but are still subject to regulatory frameworks.

Intellectual freedom extends beyond universities to include think tanks, policy institutes, writers, and independent researchers. Pakistan has an active ecosystem of policy dialogue, with institutions contributing to debates on governance, economy, and international relations. However, similar to academia, these spaces also navigate implicit boundaries shaped by political sensitivity and institutional relationships.

The digital age has introduced new opportunities and challenges for intellectual freedom. Online platforms enable scholars and thinkers to share ideas more widely and engage with global discourse. At the same time, digital expression is increasingly subject to regulatory frameworks, including cyber laws, which may influence how academic opinions are communicated in the public sphere.

Despite these constraints, there are strong indicators of resilience and growth. Pakistani academics are increasingly participating in international collaborations, publishing in global journals, and contributing to policy development. Conferences, seminars, and public lectures continue to provide platforms for intellectual exchange, even within a cautious environment.

In assessing academic and intellectual freedom in Pakistan, it is important to recognize that the issue is not defined by the absence of academic activity, but by the conditions under which inquiry is conducted and ideas are expressed. The space exists and is active, but it is often calibrated by institutional norms, societal sensitivities, and perceived boundaries.

Strengthening this domain will require enhancing institutional autonomy, protecting academic inquiry from undue interference, encouraging critical thinking, and fostering a culture that values diverse perspectives. Equally important is ensuring that universities and intellectual spaces remain arenas for open dialogue, innovation, and constructive debate, key ingredients for Pakistan's long-term development and global competitiveness.

4.6 Access to Information and Transparency

Access to information and transparency are central to accountable governance, enabling citizens to scrutinize public institutions, participate in decision-making, and hold authorities responsible for their actions. In Pakistan, this right is constitutionally guaranteed under Article 19A, which affirms that every citizen shall have the right to access information in all matters of public importance, subject to regulation and reasonable restrictions imposed by law.

Over the past decade, Pakistan has developed a relatively robust legal architecture for access to information through federal and provincial legislation. The Right of Access to Information Act, 2017 at the federal level, along with corresponding laws in Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Sindh, and Balochistan, collectively establish procedures for citizens to request information, define obligations of public bodies, and create oversight institutions, primarily information commissions, to adjudicate disputes and enforce compliance.

At the federal level, the Pakistan Information Commission (PIC) is mandated to ensure the implementation of the RTI law across federal public bodies, while provincial commissions operate within their respective jurisdictions. In principle, these institutions provide a structured mechanism for transparency, allowing citizens to file requests, appeal denials, and seek enforcement orders. However, the effectiveness of

these mechanisms varies across jurisdictions and is influenced by institutional capacity, administrative responsiveness, and political will.

Between 2022 and 2026, there has been a gradual increase in awareness and usage of RTI mechanisms, particularly among civil society organizations, journalists, and policy researchers. The number of information requests has grown, and digital submission systems have improved accessibility. Despite these gains, persistent challenges remain. Delays in responses beyond legally mandated timelines are common, disclosures are sometimes partial or incomplete, and compliance across ministries and departments is inconsistent. Moreover, while information commissions issue orders, their enforcement capacity remains limited, reducing the overall effectiveness of the system.

The expansion of digital governance has introduced new avenues for transparency. Government portals, budget disclosures, and procurement systems have improved access to certain categories of information, contributing to a shift toward proactive transparency. Online complaint systems, digital procurement platforms, and publicly accessible financial data have reduced the need for formal RTI requests in some areas. However, the quality and consistency of digital transparency remain uneven. Many datasets are outdated, incomplete, or not presented in user-friendly formats, limiting their practical value for citizens and researchers.

Table 4.6B: Comparative Overview of RTI Laws and Information Commissions in Pakistan

Jurisdiction	RTI Law	Information Commission	Legal Strength	Institutional Capacity	Response Timeliness	Enforcement Power	Overall Effectiveness	Key Observations
Federal	Right of Access to Information Act, 2017	Pakistan Information Commission	Strong	Moderate	Moderate	Limited–Moderate	Medium–High	Progressive law; improved digital access; enforcement remains a challenge
Punjab	Punjab Transparency and Right to Information Act, 2013	Punjab Information Commission	Strong	High	Relatively Fast	Moderate	High	Considered one of the most effective RTI regimes; proactive disclosure stronger
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP)	KP Right to Information Act, 2013	KP Information Commission	Very Strong	High	Fast	Strong	High	Widely regarded as a model RTI law; strong enforcement and citizen access
Sindh	Sindh Transparency and Right to Information Act, 2016	Sindh Information Commission	Moderate	Low–Moderate	Slow	Limited	Low–Medium	Institutional weakness; delays and low compliance common
Balochistan	Balochistan RTI Act, 2021	Balochistan Information Commission	Moderate	Low	Slow	Limited	Low	New framework; limited awareness and institutional capacity
Gilgit-Baltistan	GB RTI Order (administrative framework)	Administrative oversight (no fully autonomous commission)	Weak–Moderate	Low	Slow	Limited	Low	Lacks strong institutional mechanism; evolving system
Azad Jammu & Kashmir (AJK)	AJK RTI Ordinance	AJK Information Commission	Moderate	Low–Moderate	Slow	Limited	Low–Medium	Legal structure exists but weak implementation

Transparency in public procurement represents another important dimension. While regulatory frameworks and digital systems have enhanced oversight and reduced opportunities for corruption, gaps remain in the disclosure of contract details and procurement decisions. Variations in transparency practices across federal and provincial levels further complicate the landscape, affecting the ability of citizens and oversight bodies to fully assess public spending.

Legal and structural constraints also shape access to information in Pakistan. Broad exemption clauses, particularly those related to national security and cabinet confidentiality, allow for discretionary interpretation and can limit disclosure. Ambiguities in information classification, limited public awareness of RTI rights, and

administrative resistance within public bodies further contribute to the gap between legal entitlement and practical access.

In comparative terms, Pakistan's RTI legal framework is often considered progressive within the region. However, implementation remains the primary challenge, with performance indicators reflecting a system that is still evolving. The country's transparency model can best be described as one where strong legal foundations coexist with moderate and uneven execution.

Access to information in Pakistan is also transitioning from a reactive model, based on citizen requests, to a more proactive model driven by digital disclosure and open data initiatives. The success of this transition will depend on improving data quality, ensuring institutional commitment, and enhancing technological integration.

Table 4.6C: RTI Commission Performance in Pakistan.

Jurisdiction	Information Commission	Complaints / Appeals Received	Cases Resolved	Pending	Resolution Rate	Source Year	Remarks
Federal	Pakistan Information Commission	~2,200+	~1,600+	~600	~70–75%	2023–24 (PIC Reports)	Increasing caseload; improved digital intake; enforcement still evolving
Punjab	Punjab Information Commission	~4,500+	~3,800+	~700	~80–85%	2023 (PIC Punjab Report)	Strongest RTI regime; high compliance and proactive disclosure
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	KP Information Commission	~2,300+	~1,900+	~400	~80–85%	2023–24	Efficient system; strong enforcement reputation
Sindh	Sindh Information Commission	~1,000+	~500–600	~400–500	~50–55%	2022–23	Significant backlog; institutional limitations
Balochistan	Balochistan Information Commission	Limited public data	Limited public data	N/A	N/A	—	Data transparency itself remains a challenge
AJK	AJK Information Commission	Limited public data	Limited public data	N/A	N/A	—	Weak reporting practices
Gilgit-Baltistan	Administrative RTI system	No consolidated data	No consolidated data	N/A	N/A	—	Institutional mechanism not fully formalized

Data presented in Table 4.6C is derived from the latest publicly available annual and performance reports of federal and provincial information commissions (2022–2024). Variations in reporting standards, frequency, and transparency across jurisdictions limit the availability of fully comparable and up-to-date datasets, particularly for Balochistan, Gilgit-Baltistan, and AJK.

A major finding in itself is that several RTI Commissions in Pakistan do not regularly publish standardized, up-to-date performance data. This lack of transparency in transparency institutions represents a structural weakness in the governance ecosystem.

Strengthening this domain will require a multi-faceted approach. This includes enhancing the capacity and independence of information commissions, enforcing response timelines more rigorously, narrowing overly broad exemption clauses, and expanding proactive disclosure through standardized digital platforms. Equally important is increasing public awareness and encouraging greater use of RTI mechanisms.

Ultimately, access to information is not merely a procedural right; it is a foundational element of democratic governance. It empowers citizens to move from passive recipients of policy to active participants in accountability and decision-making, reinforcing transparency as a core pillar of Pakistan's governance framework.

4.7 Minority Rights and Protections

Minority rights and protections are a critical measure of a society's commitment to equality, inclusion, and the rule of law. In Pakistan, the constitutional framework provides explicit safeguards for minorities, recognizing their right to practice religion, preserve culture, and participate in public life. Key provisions include Article 20 (freedom of religion), Article 22 (protection against religious instruction of other faiths), Article 25 (equality before law), and Article 36 (protection of minorities). Together, these provisions establish

a formal commitment to safeguarding the rights and interests of non-majority communities.

Pakistan's minority population, though relatively small in percentage terms, is diverse and includes Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, Ahmadis, Parsis, Kalasha, and others. These communities are geographically concentrated in different regions, Hindus largely in Sindh, Christians in Punjab, and smaller communities spread across urban and rural areas. Minority representation is ensured in legislative bodies through reserved seats at both federal and provincial levels, providing a formal mechanism for political participation.

While constitutional guarantees provide a strong foundation for the protection of minority rights in Pakistan, their practical implementation continues to evolve within a broader context shaped by legal frameworks, administrative capacities, and societal dynamics. Ensuring equal protection under the law remains an ongoing area of focus. Although legal mechanisms and recourse are available, certain challenges such as procedural delays, access to justice, and varying levels of institutional responsiveness can affect outcomes in some cases involving discrimination or community concerns.

The state has demonstrated a consistent and firm commitment to safeguarding the rights of minority communities, with strong institutional responses and policy attention directed toward their protection. While certain sensitive issues, such as allegations of forced conversions, particularly involving young women from minority groups, have been reported, they remain subject to legal scrutiny and public debate within established judicial frameworks. Similarly, blasphemy-related cases, which are applicable to all citizens under the law, have at times highlighted the heightened vulnerabilities faced by minority communities in broader societal contexts. In such instances, the state has increasingly emphasized legal due process and the protection of affected individuals, recognizing that these matters can extend beyond court proceedings and influence community dynamics.

The situation of the Ahmadiyya Community continues to be addressed within Pakistan's existing constitutional and legal framework, which contains specific provisions relating to the public expression of religious identity. These legal arrangements reflect the country's historical, constitutional, and societal context, and remain part of broader national discussions concerning religious freedom, minority rights, and social harmony. At the same time, the state continues to emphasize the protection of all citizens under the law and the maintenance of interfaith coexistence and public order.

Another important dimension relates to the protection of places of worship and cultural heritage. The state has taken notable steps to restore and preserve minority religious sites, including temples, gurdwaras, and churches, reflecting a commitment to cultural inclusivity. While isolated incidents of vandalism or encroachment have occasionally been reported, efforts to strengthen protection mechanisms and ensure the upkeep of these sites continue to be reinforced as part of ongoing governance priorities.

Socio-economic inclusion is equally important. Minority communities contribute significantly to sectors such as education, healthcare, sanitation, and business. However, disparities in access to education, employment opportunities, and upward mobility persist. In some cases, occupational segmentation and social stigma limit economic advancement, particularly for marginalized sub-groups within minority populations.

At the policy level, there have been efforts to strengthen minority protections. These include the establishment of minority affairs departments, quota systems in public employment, and initiatives aimed at promoting interfaith harmony. Civil society organizations and community leaders also play a vital role in advocating for minority rights and facilitating dialogue across religious and cultural lines.

The role of media and education in shaping perceptions is critical. Narratives that promote tolerance, diversity, and coexistence can contribute to a more inclusive societal environment, while the absence of such narratives may reinforce stereotypes or divisions. Recent efforts to revise curricula and promote inclusive content represent steps in the right direction, though their impact varies across regions.

In assessing minority rights and protections in Pakistan, it is important to recognize that the issue is not solely about legal provisions, but about implementation, enforcement, and societal acceptance. The constitutional framework provides a strong foundation, but its effectiveness depends on institutional performance and cultural attitudes.

Moving forward, strengthening minority protections will require a comprehensive approach: ensuring effective law enforcement, improving access to justice, addressing gaps in legal protections (particularly in areas such as forced conversions), and promoting inclusive policies in education and employment. Equally important is fostering a societal ethos that values diversity as a strength rather than a point of division.

Ultimately, the protection of minority rights is not only a constitutional obligation but a reflection of the broader he



Chapter 5:

Rule of Law and Justice

The rule of law forms the backbone of any democratic society, serving as the primary mechanism through which rights are protected, obligations are enforced, and justice is delivered. While constitutional provisions articulate the scope of freedoms, it is the legal and institutional framework that determines whether these freedoms are realized in practice. In Pakistan, the rule of law reflects a complex interaction between constitutional guarantees, institutional capacity, political dynamics, and administrative practices.

At its core, the rule of law requires that all individuals and institutions, public and private, are subject to and accountable under the law. It demands equality before the law, due process, transparency in decision-making, and the consistent enforcement of legal norms. Pakistan's Constitution provides a strong foundation for these principles, with provisions ensuring the independence of the judiciary, the right to fair trial, and safeguards against arbitrary actions. However, the translation of these principles into everyday governance remains uneven.

One of the defining features of Pakistan's rule of law landscape is the gap between legal frameworks and their implementation. Laws and institutions exist across all major domains, judicial, administrative, and enforcement, but their effectiveness is often constrained by capacity limitations, procedural delays, and competing institutional influences. This creates a situation where access to justice and legal protection may vary significantly depending on geography, socio-economic status, and the nature of the case.

The judiciary plays a central role in upholding the rule of law, acting as the guardian of the Constitution and the arbiter of disputes. Pakistan's higher judiciary has, at various points, demonstrated its capacity to assert independence and intervene in matters of public importance. At the same time, concerns are periodically raised regarding judicial delays, case backlogs, and perceptions of inconsistency in decision-making. These factors influence public confidence in the justice system and shape the overall effectiveness of legal remedies.

Access to justice remains another critical dimension. While formal legal mechanisms are available, barriers such as cost, complexity, and procedural delays can limit their accessibility, particularly for marginalized communities. The large number of pending cases across courts highlights systemic inefficiencies that affect timely delivery of justice. Legal aid mechanisms exist but are not uniformly accessible or sufficiently resourced.

Law enforcement institutions, particularly the police, represent the frontline of the rule of law. Their effectiveness is essential in ensuring public safety, enforcing legal provisions, and maintaining order. However, issues such as capacity constraints, politicization, and variations in provincial reforms affect their performance. The relationship between citizens and law enforcement is often shaped by trust deficits, procedural challenges, and concerns related to accountability.

Accountability mechanisms, including anti-corruption institutions, are integral to maintaining the integrity of governance. Pakistan has established multiple bodies to investigate and prosecute corruption and misconduct. While these institutions play an important role, debates around their independence, consistency, and perceived selectivity continue to influence their credibility.

The penal system, including prisons and detention facilities, reflects another aspect of the rule of law. Overcrowding, undertrial populations, and resource constraints present ongoing challenges. The balance between punitive measures and rehabilitation remains an area requiring further policy attention.

In recent years, technological advancements have begun to shape the justice landscape. Digitalization of court records, online case tracking systems, and e-governance initiatives have improved transparency and accessibility in certain areas. However, the adoption of these systems is uneven and requires further scaling to achieve systemic impact.

In assessing the rule of law in Pakistan, it is important to recognize that the system is neither static nor uniform. It is evolving, with ongoing reforms, institutional adjustments, and policy interventions aimed at improving efficiency and fairness. At the same time, structural challenges continue to shape outcomes.

Ultimately, the strength of the rule of law lies not only in the existence of legal provisions, but in their consistent, impartial, and timely application. Ensuring that all citizens have equal access to justice, that institutions operate with transparency and accountability, and that legal protections are upheld without discrimination remains central to strengthening Pakistan's democratic framework.

This chapter examines these dimensions in detail, exploring how the judiciary, law enforcement, accountability mechanisms, and justice systems collectively influence the realization of rights and freedoms in Pakistan.

5.1 Independence of Judiciary

The independence of the judiciary is a fundamental pillar of the rule of law, ensuring that courts can adjudicate disputes, interpret the Constitution, and safeguard rights without undue influence. In Pakistan, judicial independence is constitutionally embedded, with provisions that separate the judiciary from the executive and guarantee security of tenure for judges. The higher judiciary, comprising the Supreme Court and High Courts, is entrusted with upholding constitutional supremacy and acting as a check on state power.

At the constitutional level, Pakistan provides a robust framework for judicial independence. Provisions relating to the appointment, tenure, and removal of judges are designed to insulate the judiciary from arbitrary interference. The establishment of the Judicial Commission of Pakistan (JCP) and the Parliamentary Committee on Judges' Appointment has institutionalized the appointment process, aiming to balance judicial input with parliamentary oversight.

However, the practical exercise of judicial independence reflects a more complex and evolving reality. While the judiciary operates with formal autonomy, its functioning is influenced by broader political and institutional dynamics. Perceptions of judicial independence often fluctuate depending on high-profile cases, constitutional interpretations, and the broader governance environment.

The process of judicial appointments, transfers, and career progression remains a key area of focus. The JCP-led mechanism was introduced to enhance transparency and reduce executive discretion, yet debates persist regarding the criteria for selection, the extent of institutional influence, and the transparency of

deliberations. Transfers of judges between High Courts, though constitutionally permitted, have at times generated discussion around institutional balance and consent, particularly when they occur in sensitive contexts.

Another dimension relates to institutional and external pressures. While direct interference is not formally acknowledged, the broader environment in which the judiciary operates, including political polarization, media scrutiny, and public expectations, can shape judicial functioning. Judges, particularly in higher courts, often operate under significant public and institutional attention, especially in cases involving constitutional interpretation, governance disputes, or civil-military relations.

The role of the higher judiciary in safeguarding fundamental rights remains one of the most visible aspects of judicial independence. Pakistan's superior courts have historically exercised judicial review to address issues of public importance, often invoking suo motu jurisdiction under constitutional provisions. This has enabled the judiciary to intervene in matters ranging from governance and accountability to human rights and administrative actions.

At the same time, the use of such powers has also been subject to debate. Questions have been raised regarding the scope, consistency, and institutional implications of judicial activism, particularly in relation to the balance of powers among state institutions. While such interventions can strengthen accountability, they also highlight the need for clearly defined institutional boundaries.

Judicial independence is also closely linked to public confidence in the justice system. Trust in the judiciary depends not only on its formal autonomy but also on perceptions of fairness, consistency, and impartiality. Delays in case disposal, variations in judicial interpretation, and high-profile controversies can influence this perception, even when institutional safeguards are in place.

In recent years, efforts have been made to strengthen institutional processes, including improvements in case management, transparency in proceedings, and internal accountability mechanisms. However, the effectiveness of these reforms varies, and their long-term impact is still unfolding.

In assessing judicial independence in Pakistan, it is important to distinguish between constitutional design and operational reality. The legal framework provides strong protections, but the practical exercise of independence is shaped by institutional culture, procedural integrity, and the broader governance environment.

Strengthening judicial independence will require continued emphasis on transparent appointment processes, protection from undue influence, institutional accountability, and consistency in judicial conduct. Equally important is maintaining a balance where the judiciary remains independent while operating within its constitutional mandate, reinforcing its role as a neutral arbiter and guardian of fundamental rights.

5.2 Access to Justice

Access to justice is a cornerstone of the rule of law, determining whether citizens can effectively seek remedies, enforce rights, and obtain fair outcomes through legal institutions. In Pakistan, while the legal framework provides for access to courts and due process, the practical accessibility of justice is shaped by affordability, procedural efficiency, and institutional capacity. This creates a landscape where justice is formally available but unevenly accessible across different segments of society.

Table 5.2A: Pendency, Institution, Disposal & Balance of Cases (Pakistan Judiciary)

Statement of cases Pending, Institution and Disposal during the Jan - Jun 2025 in the Superior Courts and District Judiciary of Pakistan

Name of Courts	Pendency on 1-1-2025	Institution during Jan - Jun 2025	Disposal during Jan - Jun 2025	Balance on 31-06-2025
Supreme Court of Pakistan	57,403	9,685	11,888	56,145
Federal Shariat Court	78	31	44	65
Lahore High Court	198,005	74,010	83,938	188,077
High Court of Sindh	86,421	17,699	24,677	57,289
Peshawar High Court	40,667	17,156	18,380	35,441
High Court of Balochistan	5,278	3,050	2,081	6,113
Islamabad High Court	18,527	6,270	6,694	18,547

TOTAL (SUPERIOR COURTS)	406,379	127,901	147,702	361,677
District Judiciary Punjab	1,501,119	2,124,234	2,196,515	1,432,695
District Judiciary Sindh	142,374	219,886	186,735	176,154
District Judiciary KPK	254,830	254,889	287,930	225,682
District Judiciary Balochistan	18,685	24,466	23,804	28,954
District Judiciary Islamabad	47,840	56,298	58,754	45,422
TOTAL (DISTRICT COURTS)	1,964,848	2,679,773	2,753,738	1,908,907
Grand Total	**2,371,227**	**2,807,674**	**2,901,440**	**2,270,584**

* The difference is reported due to transfer, re-opening/restoration, remand and in case where leave to appeal is granted.

** While due care has been exercised in the compilation and verification of data for this biannual Judicial Statistics report, the Law and Justice Commission of Pakistan shall not be held liable for any inadvertent errors, omissions, or discrepancies.

Categorywise Statement Cases Pending, Institution and Disposal during in the Superior Courts and District Judiciary of Pakistan. January to June 2025

High Courts	Criminal				Civil				Total			
	Pendency	Institution	Disposal	Balance	Pendency	Institution	Disposal	Balance	Pendency	Institution	Disposal	Balance
Lahore High Court	37,385	31,988	33,818	35,155	160,620	42,022	50,120	152,922	198,005	74,010	83,938	188,077
High Court of Sindh	12,411	8,048	8,146	12,313	74,010	9,651	16,531	44,976	86,421	17,699	24,677	57,289
Peshawar High Court	10,660	5,861	6,438	4,920	30,007	11,295	11,942	30,521	40,667	17,156	18,380	35,441
High Court of Balochistan	1,313	1,001	788	1,462	3,965	2,049	1,293	4,651	5,278	3,050	2,081	6,113
Islamabad High Court	1,367	1,577	1,676	1,319	17,160	4,693	5,018	17,228	18,527	6,270	6,694	18,547
Total	63,136	48,475	50,866	55,169	285,762	69,710	84,904	250,298	348,898	118,185	135,770	305,467

District Judiciary	Criminal				Civil				Total			
	Pendency	Institution	Disposal	Balance	Pendency	Institution	Disposal	Balance	Pendency	Institution	Disposal	Balance
Punjab	612,020	1,421,505	1,465,659	568,194	889,099	702,729	730,856	864,501	1,501,119	2,124,234	2,196,515	1,432,695
Sindh	71,231	148,168	141,596	78,161	71,143	71,718	45,139	97,993	142,374	219,886	186,735	176,154
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	87,030	170,282	187,999	68,231	167,800	84,607	99,931	157,451	254,830	254,889	287,930	225,682
Balochistan	9,021	17,365	16,983	9,403	9,664	7,101	6,821	19,551	18,685	24,466	23,804	28,954
Islamabad	21,596	30,865	32,924	19,548	26,244	25,433	25,830	25,874	47,840	56,298	58,754	45,422
Total	800,898	1,788,185	1,845,161	743,537	1,163,950	891,588	908,577	1,165,370	1,964,848	2,679,773	2,753,738	1,908,907
Grand Total	864,034	1,836,660	1,896,027	798,706	1,449,712	961,298	993,481	1,415,668	2,313,746	2,797,958	2,889,508	2,214,374

* The difference is reported due to transfer, re-opening/restoration, remand and in case where leave to appeal is granted.

** While due care has been exercised in the compilation and verification of data for this biannual Judicial Statistics report, the Law and Justice Commission of Pakistan shall not be held liable for any inadvertent errors, omissions, or discrepancies.

Source: Law and Justice Commission of Pakistan, Judicial Statistics of Pakistan Bi-Annual Report (2025), Government of Pakistan.

A key dimension of access to justice is the availability and affordability of legal remedies. Pakistan has a multi-tiered judicial system, including district courts, high courts, the Supreme Court, and the Constitutional Court, providing avenues for redress across civil, criminal, and constitutional matters. However, the cost of litigation, including legal fees, documentation, travel, and time, can be prohibitive, particularly for low-income individuals. Legal processes are often complex and require professional representation, which further increases the financial burden. As a result, many citizens either delay seeking justice or resort to informal dispute resolution mechanisms.

The issue of case backlog and delays is one of the most significant challenges affecting access to justice. Courts across Pakistan face a substantial volume of pending cases, leading to prolonged litigation timelines. Civil and criminal cases can take years, and in some instances decades, to reach resolution. These delays not only undermine the effectiveness of legal remedies but also erode public confidence in the judicial system. For undertrial prisoners, prolonged delays have direct human consequences, with individuals remaining in detention for extended periods without final adjudication of their cases.

Several structural factors contribute to these delays, including limited judicial capacity, procedural inefficiencies, frequent adjournments, and administrative constraints. While reforms such as case management systems and digital tracking have been introduced in some jurisdictions, their impact remains uneven and incremental.

Legal aid systems represent an important mechanism for bridging the gap in access to justice. Pakistan has established legal aid frameworks at both federal and provincial levels, including public defender initiatives and bar association support systems. Institutions such as provincial legal aid authorities aim to provide free or subsidized legal assistance to vulnerable populations, including women, children, and economically disadvantaged groups.

However, significant disparities exist in the reach and effectiveness of legal aid services. Awareness of available support is limited, particularly in rural and underserved areas. Resource constraints, uneven institutional capacity, and variations in implementation across provinces affect the quality and accessibility of legal aid. In many cases, legal aid services are unable to meet the scale of demand, leaving a large portion of the population without adequate support.

Geographic disparities further compound the issue. Urban centers generally have better access to courts, legal professionals, and support services, while rural areas face logistical challenges, including distance, lack of infrastructure, and limited availability of legal expertise. This urban–rural divide contributes to unequal access to justice across the country.

The role of alternative dispute resolution (ADR) mechanisms, including mediation and arbitration, has gained attention as a means to reduce court burden and provide faster resolution. While formal ADR systems are being integrated into the legal framework, informal mechanisms such as jirgas and panchayats continue to operate in certain areas. These systems may offer quicker resolutions but raise concerns regarding fairness, legal standards, and protection of rights, particularly for vulnerable groups.

In recent years, efforts have been made to improve access to justice through digitalization and procedural reforms. Online case tracking systems, e-courts, and digitized records have enhanced transparency and accessibility in some jurisdictions. However, these initiatives are still evolving and have yet to achieve nationwide consistency.

In assessing access to justice in Pakistan, the central challenge lies in bridging the gap between formal legal rights and practical accessibility. The system provides avenues for redress, but structural barriers, financial, procedural, and institutional, limit their effective utilization.

Strengthening access to justice will require a comprehensive approach, including reducing case backlogs through judicial reforms, expanding and improving legal aid services, simplifying legal procedures, and enhancing the use of technology. Equally important is ensuring that justice is not only available, but also timely, affordable, and equitable, so that all citizens can meaningfully exercise their legal rights.

5.3 Due Process and Fair Trial

Due process and the right to a fair trial are fundamental to the rule of law, ensuring that individuals are

treated justly within the legal system and protected from arbitrary actions by the state. In Pakistan, these principles are constitutionally enshrined, most notably through Article 10A, which guarantees the right to a fair trial and due process. This provision represents a significant evolution in Pakistan's legal framework, reinforcing procedural safeguards and aligning domestic law with international human rights standards.

At a structural level, due process requires that individuals are informed of charges against them, have access to legal representation, are tried by an impartial tribunal, and are given the opportunity to present a defense. Pakistan's legal system formally incorporates these safeguards across civil and criminal proceedings. However, as with other aspects of the rule of law, the practical realization of these rights varies significantly depending on institutional capacity, case type, and socio-economic context.

Challenges to Due Process and Fair Trial Rights in Pakistan

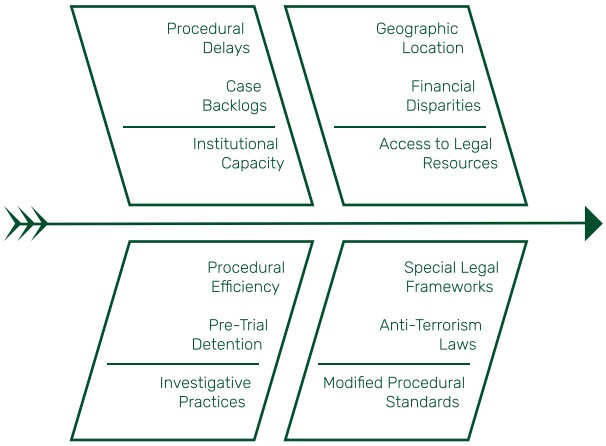


Figure: Challenges to Due Process and Fair Trial Rights in Pakistan, The Freedom Report 2026

One of the most critical challenges affecting due process is the issue of pre-trial detention and undertrial prisoners. A substantial proportion of Pakistan's prison population consists of individuals awaiting trial, many of whom remain in custody for extended periods due to delays in judicial proceedings. This situation raises concerns regarding the presumption of innocence and the proportionality of detention, particularly in cases involving minor or non-violent offenses. Limited access to bail, procedural delays, and lack of legal representation further exacerbate this issue.

The functioning of investigative and prosecutorial systems also plays a key role in ensuring fair trials. Weak investigative practices, inadequate evidence collection, and reliance on outdated procedures can affect the quality of cases presented in courts. This not only impacts conviction rates but also raises concerns about wrongful prosecutions and the overall integrity of the justice process. Coordination between police, prosecutors, and courts remains an area requiring strengthening.

Special legal frameworks, including anti-terrorism laws and special courts, introduce additional complexity into the due process landscape. While these mechanisms are designed to address serious security threats and expedite trials, they often operate under modified procedural standards. This can include restrictions on bail, accelerated timelines, and, in some cases, limitations on the disclosure of evidence. Balancing the need for national security with the protection of individual rights remains a critical policy challenge.

Another dimension of due process is equality before the law. In principle, all individuals are entitled to the same legal protections. In practice, however, disparities at times arise based on economic status, geographic location, and social position. Individuals with greater financial resources are better able to secure legal representation and navigate complex legal procedures, while marginalized groups may face barriers that limit their ability to effectively defend their rights.

The role of the judiciary is central in safeguarding due process. Courts are responsible for ensuring that legal procedures are followed, evidence is fairly evaluated, and judgments are delivered impartially. The higher judiciary, in particular, has intervened in cases involving violations of due process, reinforcing constitutional protections and setting legal precedents. However, systemic challenges such as case backlogs and procedural delays can limit the timely enforcement of these protections.

Recent efforts to improve due process include the introduction of legal reforms, digital case management systems, and capacity-building initiatives for law enforcement and judicial officers. These measures aim

to enhance transparency, reduce delays, and improve the overall quality of justice delivery. However, their implementation remains uneven, and their full impact is yet to be realized.

In assessing due process and fair trial rights in Pakistan, it is important to recognize that the legal framework provides a strong foundation, but its effectiveness is shaped by institutional performance, procedural efficiency, and access to legal resources. The challenge lies not in the absence of safeguards, but in ensuring their consistent and equitable application.

Strengthening due process will require addressing systemic issues such as prolonged pre-trial detention, improving investigative standards, ensuring access to competent legal representation, and enhancing coordination across justice sector institutions. Ultimately, the credibility of the justice system depends on its ability to deliver fair, timely, and impartial outcomes for all citizens, reinforcing trust in the rule of law and the protection of fundamental rights.

5.4 Law Enforcement and Accountability

Law enforcement and accountability are central to the functioning of the rule of law, as they represent the primary interface between the state and citizens in maintaining order, enforcing legal provisions, and ensuring public safety. In Pakistan, policing is a provincial subject, with each province responsible for its own police force under respective legal frameworks. While this decentralization allows for context-specific approaches, it also results in variations in capacity, performance, and reform implementation across regions.

The police system in Pakistan has undergone several reform efforts, most notably through changes in police laws and administrative restructuring. Provinces such as Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa have introduced reforms aimed at improving operational autonomy, service delivery, and public engagement. However, the extent and sustainability of these reforms vary, and institutional consistency remains a challenge.

A recurring concern in Pakistan's law enforcement landscape is the issue of politicization of policing. Transfers, postings, and operational priorities are often perceived to be influenced by political considerations, which can affect institutional independence and professional decision-making. This dynamic impacts not only the effectiveness of policing but also public trust in law enforcement agencies.

Another important dimension is accountability within law enforcement institutions. Pakistan has established multiple mechanisms to address misconduct, including internal disciplinary systems, judicial oversight, and external complaint forums, reflecting a structured approach to institutional accountability. While the effectiveness of these mechanisms continues to be strengthened over time, ongoing reforms and capacity-building efforts aim to further enhance transparency, address concerns related to use of force and procedural practices, and ensure consistent enforcement of accountability standards across institutions.

The process of First Information Report (FIR) registration remains a key point of interaction between citizens and the police. While legal provisions require timely registration of complaints, practical challenges, such as reluctance to register cases, administrative barriers, and informal dispute resolution pressures, can limit access to justice at the initial stage. This affects the overall integrity of the criminal justice process.

Capacity constraints also shape law enforcement performance. Issues such as resource limitations, training gaps, and outdated investigative techniques affect the quality of policing. Modern challenges, including cybercrime, organized crime, and terrorism, require specialized skills and technological capabilities that are still being developed across the system.

The relationship between law enforcement and communities is another important dimension. Public perception of the police is influenced by factors such as responsiveness, fairness, and professionalism. In recent years, initiatives aimed at community policing and citizen engagement have been introduced to improve trust and cooperation. While these efforts show promise, their reach and impact remain limited.

Accountability is also linked to the broader justice system, including prosecution and judicial oversight. Effective coordination between police, prosecutors, and courts is essential to ensure that cases are properly investigated, presented, and adjudicated. Weaknesses in this coordination can lead to low conviction rates and undermine the deterrent effect of law enforcement.

Technological advancements are gradually being integrated into policing, including digital record systems, surveillance tools, and forensic capabilities. These developments have the potential to enhance efficiency and transparency, but their adoption is uneven and often constrained by resource and capacity limitations.

In assessing law enforcement and accountability in Pakistan, a key theme is the gap between structural reforms and operational realities. While legal frameworks and reform initiatives exist, their implementation is shaped by institutional culture, administrative practices, and external influences.

Strengthening this domain will require a sustained focus on professionalization of police services, depoliticization of administrative processes, enhancement of accountability mechanisms, and investment in training and technology. Equally important is fostering a culture of service-oriented policing, where law enforcement agencies are seen not only as instruments of control but as partners in ensuring public safety and upholding the rule of law.

Ultimately, effective law enforcement and accountability are essential for building public trust, ensuring justice, and reinforcing the broader framework of governance and civil liberties in Pakistan.

5.5 Prison Conditions and Human Rights Standards

Prison conditions are a critical indicator of a country's commitment to human rights, dignity, and the rule of law. In Pakistan, the prison system operates under a legal and administrative framework that seeks to balance custody, punishment, and rehabilitation. However, the practical realities of prison management reveal significant structural and operational challenges that affect compliance with human rights standards.

Table 5.5 Pakistan Prison Statistics and Capacity by Province

Province	Total Prisons	Official Capacity	Total Inmate Population	Occupancy Rate (%)	Under-Trial Prisoners (UTP)	Death Row Population	Juvenile Prisoners	Female Prisoners
Punjab	43	37,217	61,813	166.1%	17,763	2,509	876	1,084
Sindh	22	13,938	22,499	161.4%	Not Available	557	315	269
Balochistan	12	2,525	2,919	115.6%	1,928	258	8	44
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP)	39	13,038	13,364	102.5%	10,696	361	385	137
Azad Jammu & Kashmir (AJK)	7	Not reported	764	Not Available	Not Available	Not Available	16	13
Gilgit-Baltistan (GB)	5	Not reported	372	Not Available	Not Available	Not Available	15	3

Source: Prison Data Report 2024, published January 2025 by the National Commission for Human Rights (NCHR), National Academy of Prison Administration (NAPA), and Justice Project Pakistan. National prison population reported as 102,026 inmates in 2024.

One of the most persistent issues is overcrowding. Prisons across Pakistan routinely operate beyond their authorized capacity, with occupancy levels in some facilities exceeding safe limits. A major contributing factor is the high proportion of undertrial prisoners, many of whom remain incarcerated for extended periods due to delays in the judicial process. This not only places pressure on prison infrastructure but also raises serious concerns regarding the presumption of innocence and prolonged detention without conviction.

Closely linked to overcrowding are living conditions within prisons. Limited space, inadequate sanitation, and insufficient access to basic facilities can affect the health and well-being of inmates. While standards exist under prison rules and international guidelines, such as the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Nelson Mandela Rules), their implementation varies across provinces and facilities.

Access to healthcare services is another critical dimension. Prisons are required to provide medical care to inmates, including treatment for physical and mental health conditions. However, resource constraints, shortage of medical staff, and limited infrastructure can affect the quality and availability of these services. The situation is particularly concerning for vulnerable groups, including elderly prisoners, women, and individuals with mental health conditions.

The issue of undertrial detention remains central to prison conditions. A significant proportion of the prison population consists of individuals awaiting trial, many of whom are held for non-violent offenses or due

to inability to secure bail. This reflects broader systemic challenges in the justice system, including case backlogs and procedural delays, which directly impact prison overcrowding and human rights outcomes.

Human rights concerns also extend to custodial treatment and oversight mechanisms. While legal safeguards exist to prevent abuse and ensure accountability, the effectiveness of monitoring systems varies. Oversight bodies, judicial inspections, and human rights institutions play a role in identifying issues and recommending reforms, but consistent enforcement remains a challenge.

Special attention is required for women and juvenile prisoners. Separate facilities and legal protections are provided, yet gaps remain in areas such as access to healthcare, childcare for women inmates with children, and rehabilitation programs. Juvenile justice systems, while governed by specific laws, face challenges related to implementation, infrastructure, and capacity.

Rehabilitation and reintegration are essential components of a rights-based prison system. Programs related to education, vocational training, and skill development have been introduced in various prisons to support reintegration into society. However, the scale and consistency of these programs vary, and their impact is often limited by resource constraints.

In recent years, there have been efforts to improve prison management through legal reforms, digital record systems, and capacity-building initiatives. Some provinces have introduced prison management information systems to enhance transparency and administrative efficiency. Additionally, judicial interventions and policy discussions have highlighted the need to reduce undertrial populations and improve prison conditions.

Despite these efforts, the overall assessment of prison conditions in Pakistan reflects a gap between legal standards and operational realities. While frameworks exist to ensure humane treatment, their implementation is uneven and influenced by systemic constraints.

Strengthening prison conditions will require a multi-dimensional approach: reducing overcrowding through judicial reforms and alternative sentencing mechanisms, improving healthcare and infrastructure, enhancing oversight and accountability, and expanding rehabilitation programs. Ensuring that prisons operate in line with human rights standards is not only a legal obligation but also essential for maintaining the integrity of the justice system.

Ultimately, the treatment of individuals in custody reflects the broader values of a society. Upholding dignity, fairness, and human rights within the prison system is integral to reinforcing the rule of law and building public trust in state institutions.

5.6 Anti-Corruption Frameworks

Anti-corruption frameworks form a central pillar of the rule of law, aimed at promoting transparency, accountability, and integrity across public institutions. In Pakistan, a comprehensive set of legal and institutional arrangements has been established to prevent, investigate, and address corruption. These include federal and provincial bodies, statutory provisions, and regulatory mechanisms designed to safeguard public resources and ensure responsible governance. Over time, these frameworks have continued to evolve, with increasing emphasis on strengthening institutional capacity, coordination, and public confidence.

At the federal level, institutions such as the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) and the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) play key roles in addressing corruption and financial misconduct. NAB is mandated to investigate and prosecute cases involving misuse of authority and public office, while the FIA addresses a broader range of economic crimes, including financial fraud and cyber-related offenses. Complementing these efforts are the offices of the Federal Ombudsman and provincial ombudsmen, which provide accessible grievance redressal mechanisms for citizens and contribute to administrative accountability.

At the provincial level, dedicated anti-corruption establishments operate under respective governments, focusing on administrative irregularities and promoting transparency within provincial departments. These are supported by audit institutions, parliamentary oversight committees, and regulatory authorities that collectively strengthen financial discipline and governance standards. Additionally, an active media landscape plays an important role in highlighting accountability issues, contributing to public awareness and acting as an informal check on governance practices.

Pakistan's legal framework further reinforces these efforts through laws such as the National Accountability Ordinance and relevant provisions within the Pakistan Penal Code, which criminalize corruption-related activities. Together, these mechanisms reflect a multi-layered approach to accountability, combining enforcement, oversight, and public engagement.

While the system continues to mature, ongoing reforms are focused on enhancing coordination among institutions, reducing procedural overlaps, and improving efficiency in case handling. Efforts are also being

made to strengthen transparency and ensure consistent application of accountability measures, thereby reinforcing public trust and the overall effectiveness of anti-corruption initiatives in the country.

The legal process for corruption cases is often lengthy, with investigations, prosecutions, and adjudication taking extended periods. Delays in case resolution not only weaken deterrence but also contribute to public skepticism regarding the effectiveness of accountability mechanisms. High-profile cases, in particular, tend to attract significant public attention, further shaping perceptions of the system's performance.

Transparency and access to information are closely linked to anti-corruption efforts. Initiatives such as public disclosure requirements, audit reports, and digital governance platforms aim to reduce opportunities for corruption by increasing visibility and accountability. However, the effectiveness of these measures depends on their consistent implementation and the accessibility of information to the public.

In recent years, Pakistan has undertaken efforts to strengthen its anti-corruption framework through digitalization, regulatory reforms, and institutional restructuring. E-governance systems, digital procurement processes, and online service delivery platforms have the potential to reduce discretionary power and minimize opportunities for corrupt practices. These reforms represent a shift toward preventive approaches, complementing traditional enforcement mechanisms.

International benchmarks provide an additional perspective on Pakistan's anti-corruption performance. Global indices and assessments highlight both progress and persistent challenges, particularly in areas such as enforcement consistency, institutional independence, and regulatory effectiveness. These assessments underscore the need for sustained reforms and alignment with international best practices.

An important aspect of anti-corruption efforts is the role of civil society, media, and public participation. Media reporting, civic engagement, and institutional feedback mechanisms contribute to raising awareness on governance issues and supporting accountability processes. These contributions are most effective within an enabling environment that continues to promote transparency and facilitate responsible expression and public discourse.

In assessing anti-corruption frameworks in Pakistan, it becomes clear that the challenge is not the absence of institutions or laws, but the effectiveness, credibility, and coordination of their implementation. Strengthening these frameworks requires ensuring institutional independence, improving inter-agency coordination, accelerating case resolution, and enhancing transparency mechanisms.

Ultimately, anti-corruption is not only about enforcement but about building a governance culture rooted in integrity, accountability, and public trust. A robust and credible anti-corruption framework is essential for strengthening the rule of law, improving service delivery, and fostering sustainable economic and social development in Pakistan.



Chapter 6:

Digital Freedom

Digital freedom, in its contemporary understanding, extends far beyond the mere availability of internet connectivity. It encapsulates the ability of individuals, communities, and institutions to participate meaningfully in the digital ecosystem without fear, restriction, or coercion. At its core, digital freedom is the intersection of technological access, civil liberties, and governance frameworks, shaping how citizens interact with information, institutions, and each other in an increasingly digitized society.

6.1 Digital Rights

In Pakistan, this concept has acquired growing significance over the past decade. With internet penetration surpassing 60% and mobile subscriptions exceeding 190 million, digital platforms are no longer peripheral, they are central to the architecture of modern life. Social media platforms function as public squares, e-commerce platforms as economic lifelines, and digital services as gateways to governance. From political mobilization to financial inclusion, the digital domain has become a primary arena where citizens exercise agency and negotiate power.

The expansion of Pakistan's digital landscape is a significant achievement and reflects the country's commitment to connectivity, innovation, and inclusion. Increased internet penetration, mobile access, and digital services have opened new avenues for communication, commerce, and civic participation. At the same time, the relationship between digital access and digital freedom remains nuanced. As in many countries, growing connectivity is accompanied by evolving regulatory frameworks, data governance considerations, and efforts to balance openness with security and public order. This creates a dynamic environment where expansion and regulation coexist as part of a broader policy evolution.

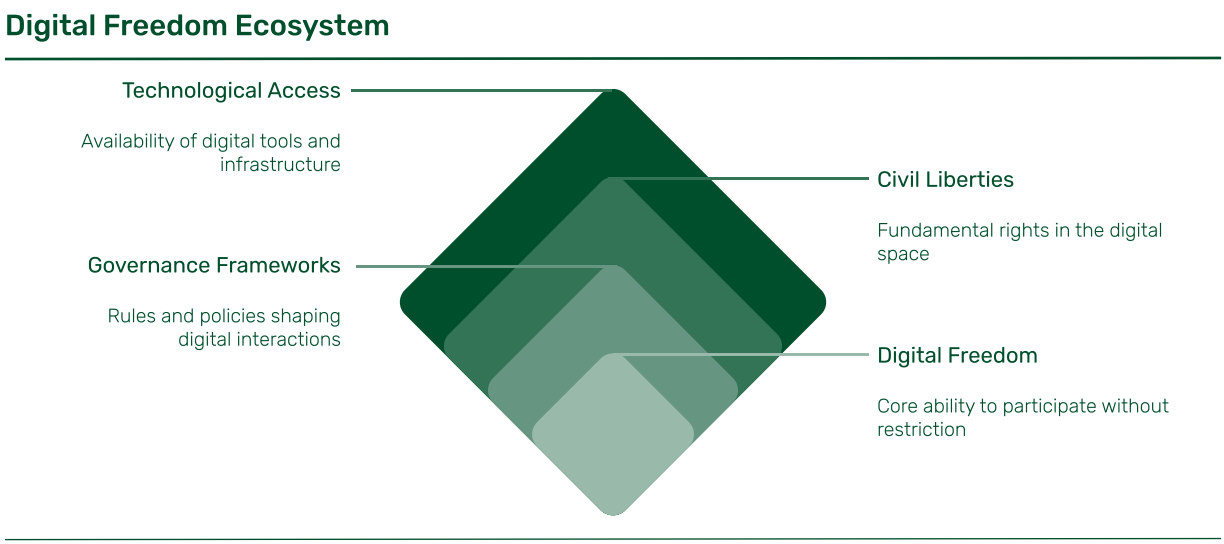


Figure : Digital Freedom Ecosystem, The Freedom Report 2026

A comparative perspective highlights that such balances are not unique to Pakistan. In the United States, strong protections for free expression exist alongside debates on platform regulation, data privacy, and surveillance. The United Kingdom and European countries emphasize robust data protection regimes, such as GDPR, while also implementing content moderation and online safety laws. In the Middle East, digital growth has accelerated, often accompanied by more centralized regulatory oversight. India presents a similar mix of rapid digital expansion with increasing regulatory interventions, particularly around content and data governance. Singapore, known for its advanced digital infrastructure, maintains structured regulations to manage online discourse and misinformation.

In this context, Pakistan's digital ecosystem reflects a global pattern rather than an exception, where the expansion of access is widely recognized and lauded, while regulatory approaches continue to evolve to address emerging challenges related to security, misinformation, and responsible digital engagement.

Despite repeated efforts and invitations by the Government of Pakistan to encourage greater localization of digital platforms and technology companies, several major international social media and digital firms have yet to establish formal operational offices in Pakistan, unlike in countries such as India and other regional markets. This has created regulatory, operational, and coordination challenges, particularly in areas relating to content management, legal compliance, taxation, user protection, and institutional engagement. Pakistani policymakers have increasingly emphasized the importance of establishing local representation to improve communication, facilitate dispute resolution, strengthen digital governance, and support the growth of Pakistan's expanding digital economy and online user base.

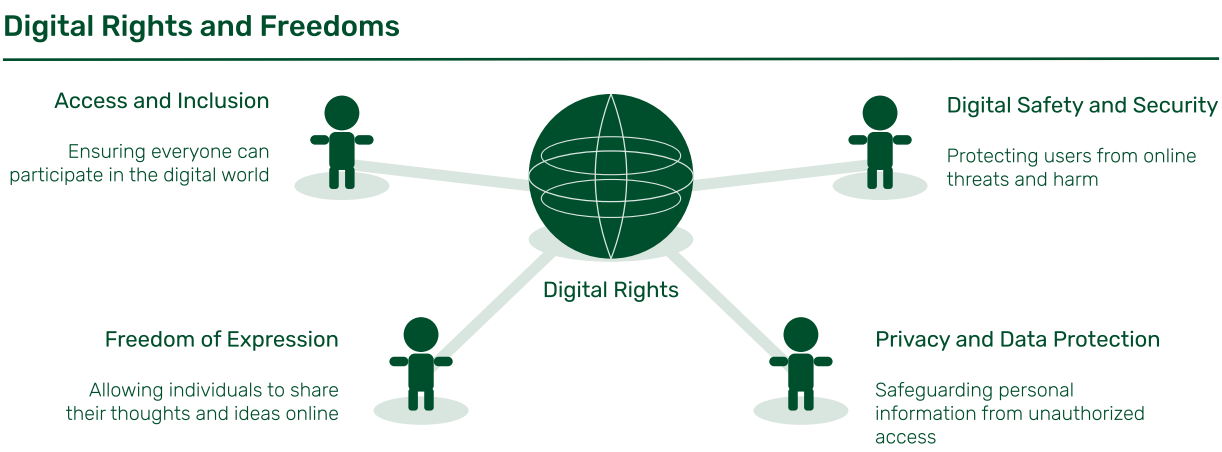


Figure : Digital Rights and Freedoms, The Freedom Report 2026

The Government of Pakistan, through its complaint and compliance mechanisms, engaged with major international digital and social media platforms regarding content considered sensitive in nature, including matters relating to religious sentiments, cultural sensitivities, public order, misinformation, unlawful digital activity, and national harmony. The data reflects the extent of complaints raised with global platforms and the subsequent actions taken by these companies in response to Pakistani authorities' concerns. The figures also demonstrate ongoing institutional coordination between Pakistan and international technology platforms aimed at improving responsible digital governance and ensuring that online spaces remain consistent with local legal, cultural, and societal frameworks.

Table 6.1 Government Engagement with International Platforms on Sensitive Digital Content.

Ser	Platform	Accounts Reported by Government of Pakistan	Accounts/ Content Actioned by Platforms	Estimated Reach / Followers Impacted	Platform Response / Compliance Rate
1	Meta Platforms (Facebook)	6,401	3,600	245.230 Million	56.3%
2	X Corp. (X)	4,260	668	8.282 Million	15.32%
3	TikTok	2,986	1,639	33.365 Million	54.89%
4	YouTube	106	16	11.848 Million	15.09%
5	Meta Platforms (Instagram)	1,325	887	2.604 Million	66.94%
6	WhatsApp	182	131	449.334 Thousand	71.98%
7	Telegram Messenger	131	95	119.356 Thousand	72.52%
	Total	**15,391**	**7,036**	**301.899 Million**	**45.84%**

Table 6.2 Targeted Group (TG) Blocking and Special Enforcement Efforts

Ser	Initiative / Enforcement Category	Accounts Reported	Accounts Actioned / Blocked	Estimated Reach / Followers Impacted
1	Efforts – 2025	1,081	774	112.7 Million
2	Special Effort – 1	752	585	2.93 Million
3	Special Effort – 2	2,344	882	33.37 Million
4	MCF	3,410	2,353	11.25 Million
	Total	**7,587**	**4,594**	**160.25 Million**

These enforcement and engagement efforts reflect Pakistan's broader emphasis on maintaining a secure and responsible digital environment while working with international platforms to address online content considered harmful, unlawful, or socially disruptive within the country's legal and cultural context.

Digital freedom in Pakistan must therefore be understood across four interlinked pillars:

6.1.1. Access and Inclusion

Access is the foundational layer of digital freedom. It includes not only physical connectivity but also affordability, digital literacy, and inclusivity. While urban centers in Pakistan benefit from relatively robust digital infrastructure, significant disparities persist across rural regions, gender groups, and socio-economic classes. The gender digital divide, in particular, remains one of the most pronounced in the region, limiting women's participation in digital spaces and, by extension, their economic and civic empowerment.

6.1.2. Freedom of Expression and Information

Digital platforms have significantly expanded avenues for public expression, allowing citizens to share views, engage in dialogue, and participate in national conversations. In Pakistan, platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, and YouTube have played an important role in shaping public discourse and enhancing civic engagement. As this space continues to grow, the state has introduced regulatory frameworks and content guidelines aimed at ensuring responsible use, addressing misinformation, and maintaining public order. These measures reflect an ongoing effort to balance openness with accountability, contributing to a more structured and secure digital environment while preserving opportunities for expression.

6.1.3. Privacy, Data Protection, and Surveillance

As digital interactions expand, the volume of personal data generated by citizens has increased significantly, bringing greater attention to issues of data governance, privacy, and security. In Pakistan, efforts are underway to strengthen a comprehensive data protection framework, with ongoing policy development aimed at enhancing safeguards for citizens while supporting digital growth. Measures related to data management and surveillance are generally guided by national security considerations and legal provisions, with a growing emphasis on improving transparency and oversight. This reflects an evolving approach to balancing security requirements with the protection of individual privacy in an increasingly digital environment.

6.1.4. Digital Safety and Security

Digital freedom is incomplete without safety. The rise of cybercrime, online harassment, misinformation, and coordinated digital attacks has transformed online spaces into contested environments. Women, journalists, minorities, and political activists are particularly exposed to targeted digital violence, which not only affects individual well-being but also shrinks the space for participation. The psychological and social costs of digital insecurity often lead to withdrawal or self-censorship, undermining the very premise of an open digital society.

6.2 The Governance Dimension: Control vs. Rights

A defining feature of Pakistan's digital ecosystem is the active role of the state in shaping and regulating digital spaces. Institutions such as the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) and relevant enforcement bodies operate within a framework that seeks to balance connectivity, security, and responsible information management. These objectives are aligned with global practices, where governments play a key role in ensuring safe and reliable digital environments for its citizens.

This approach reflects a calibrated balance between two complementary paradigms:

» A regulatory model focused on maintaining security, managing risks, and ensuring compliance

» A rights-oriented model aimed at enabling access, protecting users, and supporting digital participation

Pakistan's digital governance framework continues to evolve within this balanced approach, with ongoing efforts to refine policies, enhance clarity, and engage stakeholders. As a result, the ecosystem reflects a dynamic interplay between regulation and openness, providing both structure and opportunity for citizens, businesses, and digital platforms.

6.3 Digital Freedom as a Development Imperative

Digital freedom is not merely a civil liberties issue, it is also a developmental and economic imperative. Countries that foster open, secure, and rights-based digital ecosystems tend to experience:

» Higher levels of innovation and entrepreneurship

» Greater foreign investment in digital industries

» Stronger knowledge economies

» Enhanced global competitiveness

For Pakistan, which ranks among the leading freelancing economies globally, the digital sector represents a significant source of economic opportunity and growth. The government has increasingly recognized the importance of a stable and enabling digital environment to support job creation, entrepreneurship, and global integration. Ongoing efforts to streamline regulatory frameworks and enhance digital infrastructure are aimed at providing greater clarity and consistency, ensuring that the country's growing freelance and technology ecosystem continues to thrive.

6.4 From Legal Guarantees to Lived Realities

Pakistan's constitutional framework provides guarantees related to freedom of expression, privacy, and access to information. However, the translation of these rights into the digital domain remains uneven. There exists a gap between formal legal provisions and lived experiences, shaped by enforcement practices, institutional capacity, and socio-political dynamics.

Understanding digital freedom in Pakistan therefore requires a dual lens:

» Normative Analysis: What rights and protections exist in law and policy

» Empirical Reality: How these rights are experienced by citizens in practice

This chapter adopts this dual approach, evaluating both the regulatory architecture and the everyday realities of digital engagement.

6.5 Internet Access and Affordability

Pakistan made notable progress in expanding internet access during 2025-26, driven by sustained public investment, regulatory reforms, and a long-term push toward nationwide digital connectivity. At the center of this expansion is the Universal Service Fund (USF), which continues to extend infrastructure to underserved and remote regions.

Recent USF initiatives highlight the scale of this effort. Two Optical Fiber Cable (OFC) projects worth approximately Rs. 3 billion were awarded to Pakistan Telecommunication Company Limited (PTCL) to expand connectivity across Ghotki, Kandhkot-Kashmore, Sukkur, and Khairpur districts. In addition, the approval of nine telecom projects valued at Rs. 13.05 billion is expected to deliver high-speed internet and voice services to approximately 5.55 million people across 178 towns and union councils and 753 mauzas in 11 districts. These projects combine next-generation broadband rollout with large-scale fiber expansion, including more than 1,400 kilometers of new optical fiber infrastructure.

These efforts sit within the broader "Connect Pakistan 2030" strategy, which outlines a structured roadmap for digital expansion. The strategy focuses on four key pillars: increasing submarine cable capacity, accelerating domestic fiber deployment, introducing a uniform Right-of-Way policy to reduce infrastructure costs, and fast-tracking spectrum allocation. The government has also set forward-looking targets, including achieving baseline internet speeds of 100 Mbps, connecting 10 million households through fiber, and positioning Pakistan as a regional hub for artificial intelligence and cloud services.

At a systems level, Pakistan's digital infrastructure has expanded significantly. The country now has over 150 million broadband users, supported by a national fiber backbone exceeding 230,000 kilometers, more than 58,423 cellular towers, and a growing network of commercial data centers. International bandwidth capacity has also increased, with submarine cable capacity surpassing 17.21 Tbps, with 27,727 Pb of data usage, and expected to rise further, strengthening Pakistan's role as a regional connectivity corridor linking South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East.

At the same time, Pakistan is preparing for the transition to next-generation connectivity. While commercial 5G services have been auctioned and ready for launch, the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority has undertaken a series of pilot trials in collaboration with telecom operators to advance the country's transition toward next-generation connectivity.

However, progress toward a full-scale rollout has been moderated by key structural constraints, including limited spectrum availability, prevailing economic pressures, and the substantial capital investment required for infrastructure development. Within the framework of the Connect Pakistan 2030 vision, current efforts are strategically focused on strengthening fiber backhaul capacity, optimizing spectrum planning, and ensuring overall ecosystem readiness, rather than pursuing an immediate nationwide 5G deployment. Meanwhile,

telecom operators have already initiated testing phases, and based on recent industry communications, a commercial launch appears increasingly imminent.

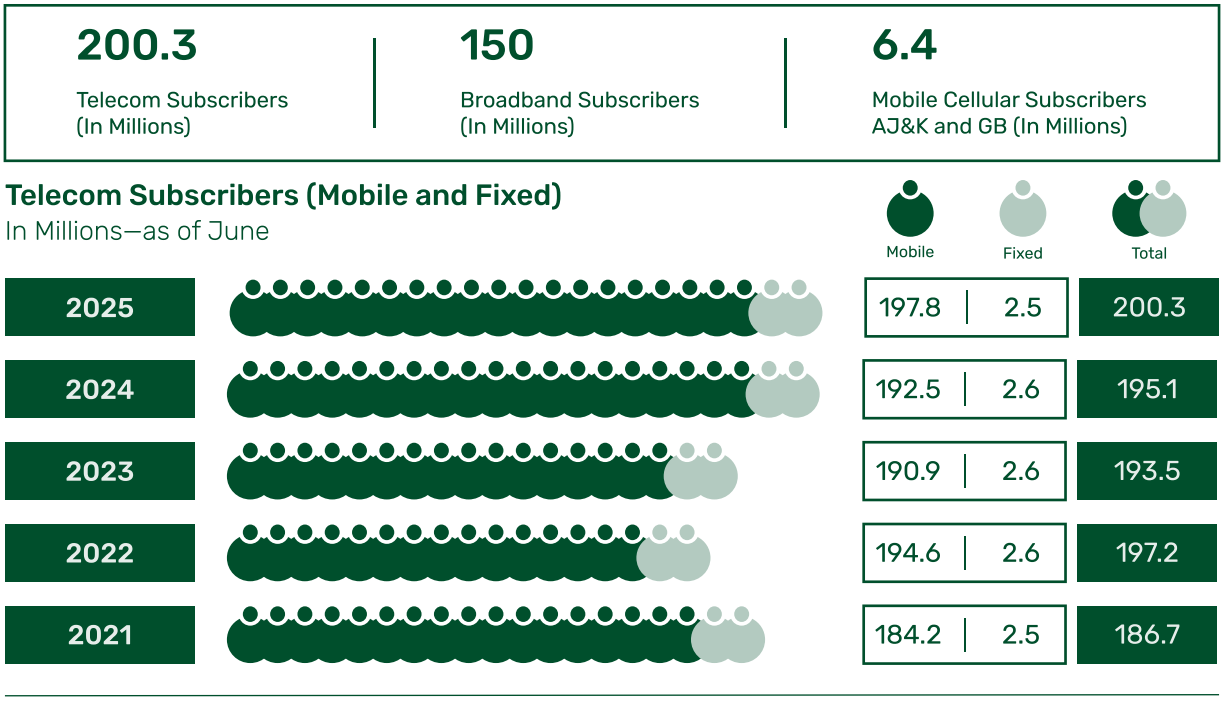


Figure : Subscribers Data, Source: Pakistan Telecommunications Authority, Annual Report 2025

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Despite these advances, important gaps remain in translating infrastructure growth into meaningful and equitable access. Broadband penetration has increased, but the quality and reliability of connectivity vary significantly across regions. Rural areas continue to experience slower speeds and less stable connections, while high-speed fiber access remains concentrated in urban centers. The government's target of 100 Mbps baseline speeds reflects a future ambition rather than current reality for most users.

Affordability remains a key constraint. While network expansion has improved availability, the relative cost of internet services, particularly when considered against average income levels, continues to limit access for low-income populations. Device affordability, especially access to smartphones and digital tools, further restricts meaningful participation in the digital economy.

Structural inequalities also persist. Gender disparities in internet access remain pronounced, particularly in rural areas, where social, economic, and educational barriers limit women's digital inclusion. Similarly, gaps in digital literacy reduce the ability of many users to fully benefit from available connectivity.

In addition, last-mile connectivity continues to be a bottleneck. While backbone infrastructure has expanded rapidly, extending high-quality connections directly to households and smaller communities remains uneven. Issues of service reliability, including network disruptions and inconsistent performance, further affect user experience.

Beyond questions of access, digital freedom in Pakistan is also shaped by security and governance dynamics. Authorities have, at times, implemented temporary internet and mobile service disruptions in response to political or security situations. While these measures are typically justified on grounds of public order and safety, they directly impact access to information, economic activity, and the continuity of digital services. Regulatory frameworks governing online spaces also allow for content restriction and platform controls, contributing to a more managed digital environment.

Although, Pakistan's approach to internet expansion reflects strong momentum in infrastructure development and strategic planning. However, the transition from basic connectivity to inclusive, affordable, and reliable access remains incomplete. While the country is building the foundations of a digitally connected economy, ensuring that access is equitable, uninterrupted, and supportive of broader digital freedoms remains an ongoing challenge.

Pakistan's Digital Connectivity Expansion: SWOT Analysis

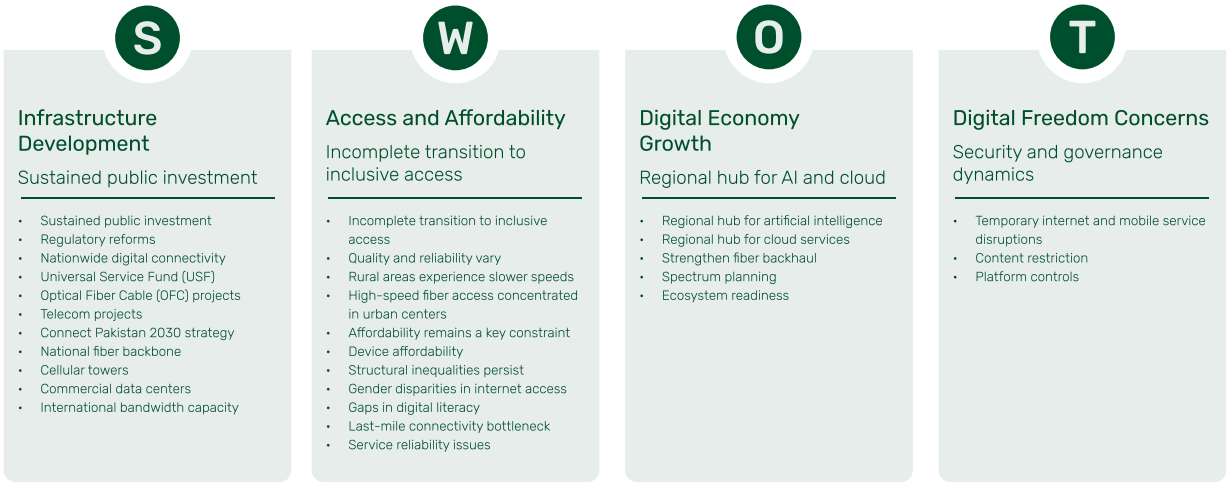


Figure: Pakistan's Digital Connectivity Expansion, The Freedom Report 2026

6.6 Online Expression and Regulation

Online expression in Pakistan operates within a tightly managed regulatory environment shaped by security concerns, political sensitivities, and evolving digital governance frameworks. While the expansion of internet access has enabled greater participation in digital spaces, the ability to freely express, access, and share information remains uneven and, at times, constrained.

At the core of Pakistan's digital regulatory framework is the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA), which is designed to safeguard citizens against online harms, including cybercrime, fraud, harassment, identity theft, and misuse of digital platforms. The law provides authorities with the necessary tools to investigate offenses, regulate harmful content, and work with service providers to ensure a safer digital environment. By addressing emerging risks in the online space, PECA plays a key role in protecting individuals, particularly vulnerable groups, from exploitation and abuse, while supporting responsible and secure digital engagement across the country.

Online Expression in Pakistan: PESTEL Analysis

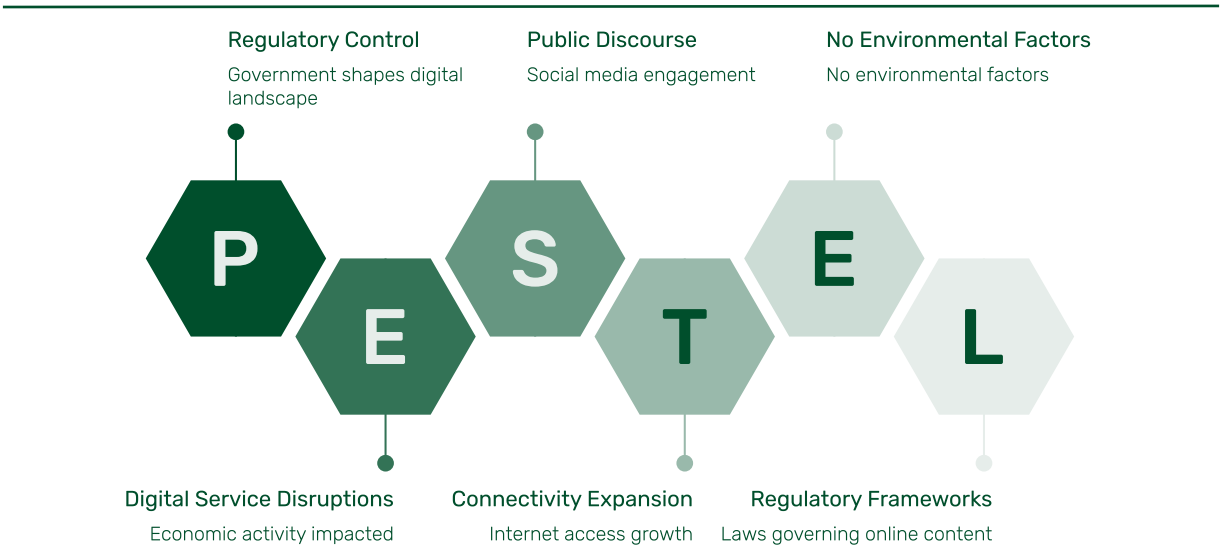


Figure : Online Expression in Pakistan, The Freedom Report 2026

In practice, these provisions have provided authorities with legal mechanisms to address concerns related to misinformation, cybercrime, hate speech, unlawful digital activity, and content considered harmful to public order or national security. At times, the implementation of these measures has generated public debate among journalists, civil society representatives, and digital rights advocates regarding the interpretation and application of online content regulations, particularly in politically sensitive contexts. This evolving regulatory environment has also encouraged broader discussions on the need for greater legal clarity, institutional transparency, and balanced implementation frameworks that both protect constitutional freedoms and ensure responsible digital communication in an increasingly complex online ecosystem.

Beyond legal frameworks, the state also exercises control through administrative and technical measures. The Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) plays a central role in overseeing online platforms and has the authority to block or restrict access to websites, applications, and specific content. Social media platforms have, at different times, faced temporary restrictions or disruptions, particularly during periods of political unrest or security concerns. These measures are typically justified as necessary to maintain public order or prevent the spread of misinformation, but they also limit access to information and disrupt digital communication.

The regulatory environment is also evolving alongside Pakistan's growing digital ecosystem and expanding online population of over 240 million people, making the country one of the region's significant emerging digital markets. In this context, authorities have increasingly emphasized the importance of stronger platform governance and greater institutional coordination with global technology and social media companies operating in Pakistan. Policy discussions have included areas such as content management, user safety, compliance with local laws, responsible digital conduct, and the removal of content considered inconsistent with legal provisions, public order, or broader societal and cultural norms.

At the same time, the Government of Pakistan has encouraged major international digital and media platforms to establish formal offices and operational presence within the country, similar to their presence in several other large global markets. Policymakers argue that local representation would improve coordination, enhance responsiveness to users and regulators, strengthen accountability mechanisms, facilitate investment and taxation frameworks, and support the long-term growth of Pakistan's digital economy. These measures are broadly presented as part of an effort to create a safer, more structured, and locally responsive digital environment while balancing technological innovation, user rights, and societal considerations.

An important consideration is maintaining an appropriate balance between regulatory frameworks and the protection of freedoms. Pakistan's approach reflects a prioritization of stability and security, often resulting in precautionary restrictions on digital spaces. However, the absence of consistent transparency mechanisms, such as publicly available data on content removal, platform blocking, or legal requests, limits accountability and makes it difficult to assess the proportionality of such measures.

In addition, periodic internet and mobile network disruptions continue to affect the reliability of online expression. Temporary shutdowns or throttling of services, particularly during politically sensitive periods, have significant implications not only for freedom of expression but also for economic activity, access to emergency information, and the functioning of digital services.

At the same time, digital platforms remain an important space for public discourse in Pakistan. Social media has enabled citizens, particularly younger populations, to engage in political discussions, raise awareness on social issues, and mobilize around causes. This creates a dynamic tension: while digital spaces expand opportunities for participation, they are simultaneously subject to increasing oversight and control.

In sum, Pakistan's digital ecosystem is still evolving, reflecting both rapid expansion and ongoing policy refinement. On one hand, increased connectivity and widespread platform usage have significantly broadened opportunities for public engagement, information sharing, and economic participation. On the other, the development of regulatory frameworks and enforcement practices continues to adapt to emerging challenges. Periods of limited or evolving regulation in recent years, including during 2022, 2023, and 2024, have, at times, coincided with instances of misinformation, coordinated online mobilization, and public order disruptions, underscoring the need for a more structured digital governance approach.

Within this context, Pakistan's approach reflects a dual reality where openness and regulation coexist. The focus going forward lies in further strengthening governance mechanisms that protect users from online harm, ensure stability, and enhance trust in digital platforms, while maintaining transparency, proportionality, and alignment with fundamental rights.

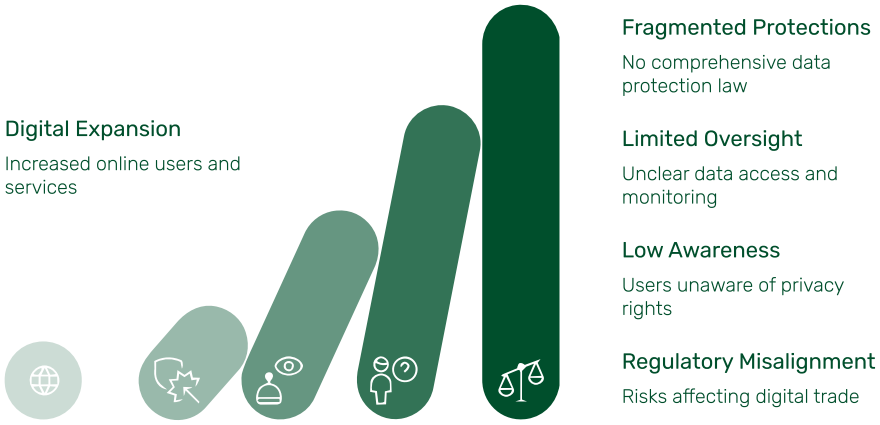
6.7 Data Protection and Privacy

Data protection and privacy in Pakistan remain in a transitional phase, shaped by rapid digital expansion but

lacking a fully enacted, comprehensive legal framework. As more citizens come online and digital services scale across sectors, the volume of personal data being generated, collected, and processed has increased significantly. However, the systems governing how this data is protected, shared, and regulated have not evolved at the same pace.

At present, Pakistan does not have a fully operational, standalone data protection law. A draft Personal Data Protection Bill has been under consideration for several years, aiming to establish principles around data collection, consent, storage, and processing. The proposed framework includes provisions for user rights, data localization, and the establishment of a regulatory authority. However, delays in its enactment have left a regulatory gap, where protections remain fragmented and unevenly enforced.

Digital Expansion Outpaces Data Protection in Pakistan



igure : Digital Expansion Outpaces Data Protection in Pakistan, The Freedom Report 2026

In the absence of a comprehensive law, aspects of data protection are addressed through existing legal instruments, most notably the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA). While PECA includes provisions related to unauthorized access, data breaches, and cyber offenses, it is primarily a cybercrime law rather than a rights-based data protection framework. As a result, it focuses more on penalizing misuse of data than on safeguarding individual privacy rights or regulating how institutions collect and process personal information.

A key issue lies in the balance between surveillance and privacy. As digital governance mechanisms expand, state capacity to monitor online activity and access user data has increased. Without clear safeguards, such as independent oversight, judicial authorization requirements, and transparent reporting, there is limited visibility into how these powers are exercised. This creates uncertainty around the extent to which personal data is protected from misuse or excessive monitoring.

Private sector practices also contribute to the complexity of the data protection landscape. Telecom operators, financial service providers, and digital platforms collect large volumes of user data, often with limited transparency around how that data is stored, shared, or monetized. While some organizations follow internal compliance standards or international best practices, there is no uniform enforcement mechanism to ensure consistency across the ecosystem.

At the user level, awareness of data privacy rights remains relatively low. Many users have limited understanding of how their data is used or what protections are available to them. This is compounded by the absence of accessible mechanisms for redress in cases of data misuse or breaches.

Cross-border data flows present an additional layer of challenge. As Pakistan positions itself as a regional digital and data transit hub, questions around data localization, international data sharing, and alignment with global privacy standards become increasingly important. Without a finalized legal framework, Pakistan risks regulatory misalignment with international partners, which could affect digital trade, investment, and cooperation.

Pakistan's data protection and privacy landscape reflects a growing mismatch between digital expansion and regulatory readiness. While efforts to introduce a comprehensive legal framework are underway, current protections remain fragmented, enforcement mechanisms limited, and oversight structures underdeveloped. Strengthening data protection will require not only the enactment of legislation but also the establishment of transparent institutions, clear accountability mechanisms, and greater public awareness to ensure that privacy rights are meaningfully protected in an increasingly digital society.

6.8 Cyber Laws and Digital Governance

Pakistan's cyber law and digital governance framework has evolved in response to rapid digitization, expanding online participation, and growing concerns around cybersecurity, misinformation, and national security. While the country has established a foundational legal and institutional structure to regulate digital spaces, the framework remains characterized by strong state control, overlapping mandates, and ongoing tensions between governance and rights.

In the absence of a comprehensive overarching legal framework governing cyberspace, Pakistan's cyber regulatory environment has primarily been anchored in the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA), which serves as the principal legislation addressing cyber offenses, digital conduct, online safety, and unlawful electronic activities. The law provides state institutions with mechanisms to investigate cybercrimes, address offenses such as hacking, fraud, online harassment, and misinformation, and facilitate the regulation of unlawful digital content. As Pakistan's digital ecosystem has expanded rapidly, PECA has also evolved into a broader governance instrument supporting oversight of digital platforms and online spaces.

Institutionally, digital governance is distributed across multiple bodies, with the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) playing a leading role in regulating telecommunications and online platforms. PTA has the authority to block or restrict access to websites, applications, and content deemed unlawful or against national interests. It also engages with global technology companies to ensure compliance with local regulations, including content moderation requirements and data-related directives.

In addition, enforcement under the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) is carried out by agencies such as the Federal Investigation Agency, particularly through its cybercrime wing, which has traditionally led investigations into digital offenses and online activity. More recently, the establishment of the National Cyber Crime Investigation Agency (NCCIA) marks a shift toward a more specialized institutional framework for addressing cybercrime. While this evolving multi-agency architecture reflects an expanding governance ecosystem, it also introduces challenges related to coordination, clarity of mandates, and institutional accountability.

In this context, the proposed establishment of the Social Media Protection and Regulatory Authority (SMPRA) is expected to help address existing institutional and regulatory gaps by creating a more structured, coordinated, and specialized framework for digital platform engagement and social media governance. The proposed authority is aimed at improving coordination with international technology companies, streamlining complaint management, strengthening user protection mechanisms, and facilitating more effective implementation of digital regulations in line with Pakistan's legal, cultural, and societal considerations.

A defining feature of Pakistan's digital governance model is its emphasis on security-driven regulation. Policies and enforcement actions are often shaped by concerns related to national security, political stability, and the prevention of misinformation. This has led to the use of measures such as content blocking, platform restrictions, and, at times, internet shutdowns or service disruptions during sensitive periods. While these actions are framed as necessary for maintaining order, they also raise questions about proportionality and consistency.

Another key aspect is the increasing focus on platform governance and localization. Authorities have sought to bring global social media and technology companies under local regulatory frameworks, including requirements for compliance with national laws, potential data localization expectations, and mechanisms for responding to government requests. This reflects a broader global trend toward digital sovereignty, but in Pakistan's case, it is still evolving without a fully codified and transparent system.

Despite these developments, several structural gaps remain. There is limited transparency around how regulatory powers are exercised, particularly in relation to content removal, platform blocking, and surveillance practices. Public reporting mechanisms and independent oversight structures are either underdeveloped or not consistently applied, making it difficult to assess the impact and fairness of governance actions.

Furthermore, the legal framework has not fully kept pace with emerging digital challenges such as artificial intelligence governance, cross-border data regulation, and platform accountability in complex digital ecosystems. As Pakistan positions itself within a global digital economy, the absence of clear, forward-looking policies in these areas may create regulatory uncertainty.

At the same time, digital governance in Pakistan continues to expand in ambition. Government initiatives under broader digital strategies aim to modernize public services, enhance cybersecurity capacity, and strengthen regulatory institutions. However, the effectiveness of these efforts will depend on achieving a more balanced approach, one that ensures security and regulatory control while safeguarding transparency, accountability, and fundamental rights.

Pakistan's cyber laws and digital governance framework provides a functional but evolving structure for managing digital spaces. While it has enabled the state to respond to emerging cyber threats and regulate online activity, it also reflects a governance model where control mechanisms often outpace rights protections. Moving forward, strengthening institutional coordination, enhancing transparency, and aligning legal frameworks with international standards will be critical to building a more balanced and resilient digital governance system.

Unbalanced Digital Governance in Pakistan

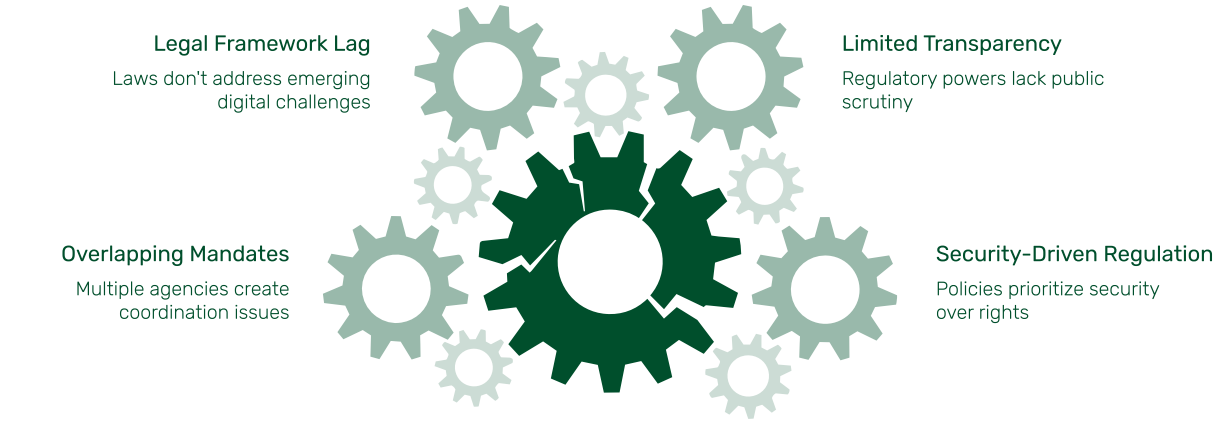


Figure : Unbalanced Digital Governance in Pakistan, The Freedom Report 2026

6.9 Misinformation, Disinformation & Content Moderation

The spread of misinformation and disinformation has become a defining challenge in Pakistan's digital ecosystem, particularly in the context of political polarization, security developments, and public health communication. As internet penetration and social media usage have expanded, digital platforms have increasingly become the primary source of information for large segments of the population. This has amplified both the speed and scale at which false or misleading information circulates.

Challenges in Combating Misinformation in Pakistan

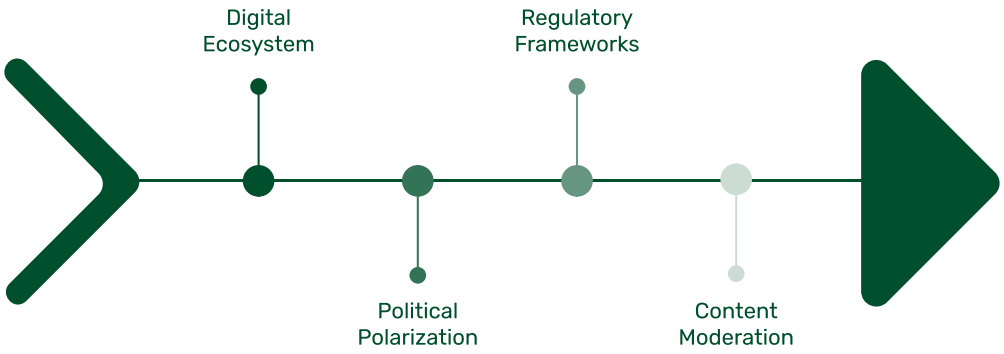


Figure : Challenges in Combating Misinformation in Pakistan, The Freedom Report 2026

Misinformation in Pakistan has, at times, been observed during periods of heightened political activity, public demonstrations, or crisis situations, where unverified content and misleading narratives can circulate more rapidly across digital platforms. Disinformation, deliberate attempts to shape narratives or influence public perception, has also been observed in more coordinated forms, including the use of networked accounts and targeted messaging. The absence of strong verification habits, combined with limited digital literacy, increases vulnerability to such content, particularly among new internet users.

The state's response to misinformation in Pakistan is primarily guided by regulatory and legal mechanisms under the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) and directives issued by the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA). These frameworks provide authorities with the tools to address the spread of false or harmful

information, including the ability to manage content, engage with digital platforms, and take action where necessary to protect public order and societal well-being. Such measures reflect a proactive approach to maintaining the integrity of the information ecosystem, particularly during sensitive periods.

This approach is broadly aligned with international practices. In Europe, frameworks such as the Digital Services Act (DSA) require platforms to remove illegal content and address systemic risks related to misinformation. The United Kingdom's Online Safety Act establishes regulatory oversight to ensure platforms manage harmful content responsibly. In the United States, while free speech protections are strong, mechanisms such as platform moderation policies and legislation like the Communications Decency Act (Section 230) shape how online content is governed.

In this global context, Pakistan's regulatory efforts represent an evolving attempt to balance the need for open digital engagement with the responsibility to mitigate misinformation, safeguard users, and ensure a secure and reliable digital environment.

Content moderation in Pakistan operates through a combination of state intervention and platform-level enforcement. Global social media companies apply their own community guidelines, using automated systems and human review to remove or limit content. At the same time, they are required to respond to government requests for content removal or access restrictions. This dual system often results in inconsistent moderation outcomes, where similar types of content may be treated differently depending on platform policies or regulatory pressure.

A key issue in Pakistan's content moderation landscape is the lack of transparency. There is limited public information on the volume and nature of content removal requests, the criteria used for blocking decisions, or the processes available for users to challenge such actions. This opacity makes it difficult to assess whether restrictions are proportionate, necessary, or aligned with international standards on freedom of expression.

Another challenge lies in the balance between countering misinformation and protecting legitimate expression. Measures such as platform blocking or broad content restrictions, particularly during politically sensitive periods, can inadvertently suppress access to credible information and restrict public discourse. In some cases, efforts to control misinformation have coincided with wider disruptions to digital services, further complicating access to reliable information.

At the same time, non-regulatory responses remain limited. Digital literacy initiatives, independent fact-checking mechanisms, and public awareness campaigns have not scaled at the same pace as the problem. As a result, users often lack the tools to critically evaluate information, increasing reliance on informal networks and amplifying the spread of unverified content.

The private sector and civil society have begun to play a role in addressing these challenges, including through fact-checking initiatives and platform partnerships. However, these efforts remain fragmented and lack a coordinated national strategy.

Misinformation and disinformation in Pakistan represent a growing and complex challenge, shaped by rapid digital adoption and evolving information dynamics. While regulatory responses have focused on control and enforcement, gaps remain in transparency, accountability, and user empowerment. Addressing this issue effectively will require a more balanced approach, one that combines proportionate regulation with investments in digital literacy, independent verification systems, and greater transparency in content moderation practices.



Chapter 7:

Economic Freedom

Economic freedom represents the capacity of individuals, businesses, and institutions to make economic decisions with autonomy, within a framework that is predictable, transparent, and equitable. It is not merely about the absence of state intervention, but about the presence of enabling conditions, secure property rights, fair regulation, open markets, and access to financial and economic opportunities. In modern governance, economic freedom is intrinsically linked with development outcomes, institutional trust, and social mobility.

In Pakistan's context, economic freedom exists within a layered and evolving institutional landscape. The country has made notable progress in certain domains, particularly in financial inclusion, digital governance, and business facilitation. However, structural constraints, ranging from regulatory fragmentation and weak enforcement mechanisms to informality and market distortions, continue to limit the full realization of economic agency.

This chapter examines economic freedom as both a structural condition and a lived experience, capturing how policies, institutions, and market realities shape the economic choices available to citizens and enterprises. The analysis reveals a system in transition: one that reflects reform momentum, yet remains constrained by legacy inefficiencies and governance gaps.

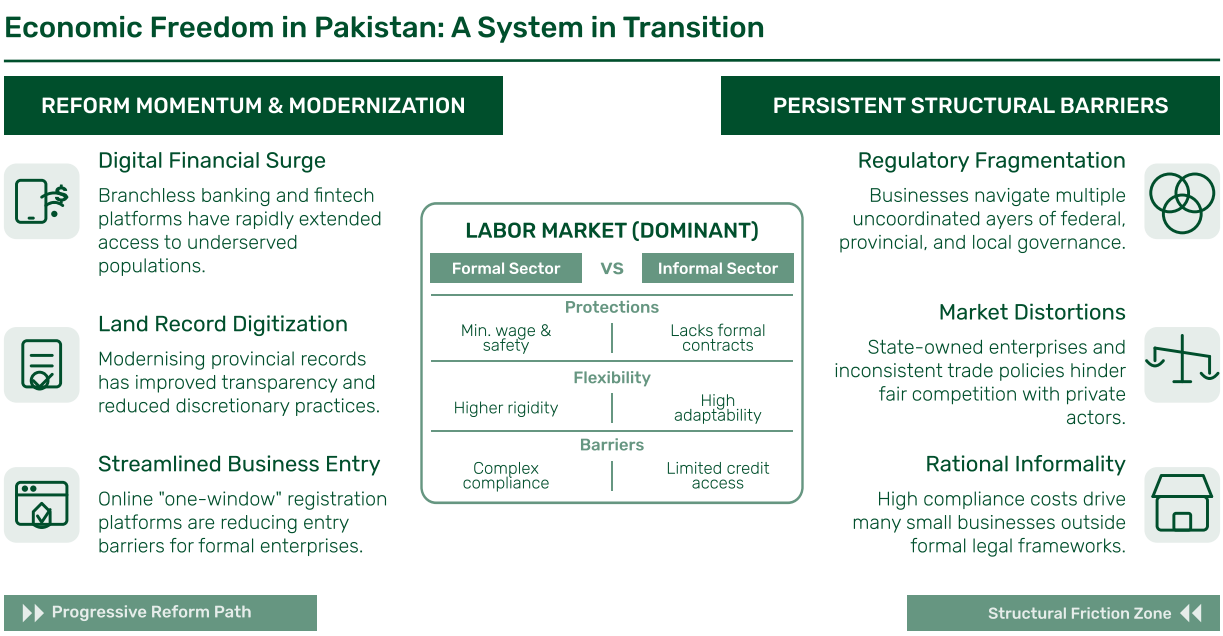


Figure: Economic Freedom in Pakistan: A System in Transition, The Freedom Report 2026

7.1 Property Rights

At the core of economic freedom lies the assurance that individuals can securely own, utilize, and transfer assets. Property rights not only underpin investment and economic activity but also serve as a critical interface between citizens and the state. In Pakistan, while constitutional protections for property exist, the practical enforcement of these rights remains uneven and often contested.

The land administration system illustrates this tension. Despite significant reforms in provinces such as Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, where digitization of land records has improved transparency and reduced discretionary practices, large parts of the country continue to rely on fragmented and manual systems. These systems are susceptible to manipulation, overlapping claims, and administrative opacity, particularly in rural and peri-urban areas.

Urban land governance presents its own challenges. Informal settlements, weak zoning enforcement, and inconsistencies in municipal regulation create uncertainty around property ownership and usage rights. This ambiguity not only discourages formal investment but also limits the ability of individuals to leverage property as collateral within formal financial systems.

Judicial inefficiencies further compound these issues. Property disputes often remain unresolved for extended periods, increasing transaction risks and undermining confidence in the legal system. The slow pace of adjudication effectively weakens the enforceability of rights that are otherwise protected in law.

In the domain of intellectual property, enforcement mechanisms remain underdeveloped. While Pakistan has established legal frameworks aligned with international standards, implementation gaps persist, particularly in sectors such as digital media, pharmaceuticals, and software development.

Collectively, these factors indicate that while property rights are formally recognized, their operational reliability remains constrained by administrative, legal, and institutional limitations.

7.2 Regulatory Environment

The regulatory environment defines the conditions under which economic actors operate. It shapes business confidence, investment decisions, and the overall efficiency of markets. In Pakistan, the regulatory landscape has undergone incremental modernization, particularly through digitization and business facilitation initiatives. However, it continues to exhibit complexity, fragmentation, and variability across jurisdictions.

Efforts to streamline business processes, such as the introduction of online registration systems, one-window facilitation platforms, and e-governance tools, have reduced entry barriers for formal enterprises. These reforms signal a shift toward greater transparency and efficiency, particularly at the federal level.

Yet, regulatory fragmentation remains a defining feature. Businesses must navigate multiple layers of governance, including federal ministries, provincial departments, and local authorities. Each layer may impose distinct requirements, often with limited coordination or standardization. This multiplicity increases

compliance costs and creates uncertainty, particularly for small and medium enterprises.

Policy inconsistency further complicates the regulatory environment. Frequent changes in taxation, trade policies, and sector-specific regulations create unpredictability that discourages long-term planning and investment. In certain cases, regulatory enforcement is uneven, with discretionary practices undermining the principle of rule-based governance.

Tax administration, while undergoing reforms, continues to present challenges related to documentation requirements, audit processes, and dispute resolution. The perception of a narrow tax base combined with a relatively high compliance burden reinforces incentives for informality.

At the same time, digital transformation initiatives, such as electronic procurement systems, online tax filing, and integrated service portals, are gradually reducing administrative friction and improving accountability.

The regulatory environment in Pakistan, therefore, reflects a dual reality: one of reform-driven modernization alongside persistent structural complexity.

7.3 Market Openness and Competition

Market openness and competition are essential for fostering innovation, efficiency, and consumer welfare. They enable the allocation of resources based on productivity rather than privilege and create opportunities for new entrants to challenge established players.

In Pakistan, the degree of market openness has fluctuated in response to macroeconomic pressures and policy priorities. Trade liberalization efforts have at times expanded access to global markets, but these have often been offset by periods of protectionism, import restrictions, and foreign exchange controls. Such oscillations create uncertainty for businesses engaged in international trade and disrupt supply chains.

Domestic competition also exhibits uneven characteristics. Certain sectors, such as telecommunications and banking, have seen increased competition and regulatory oversight. However, other sectors remain concentrated, with limited entry and significant barriers for new participants.

State-owned enterprises (SOEs) continue to play a prominent role in key industries, including energy, transportation, and infrastructure. While these entities serve important public functions, their market presence can distort competition, particularly when regulatory frameworks do not ensure a level playing field between public and private actors.

The Competition Commission of Pakistan plays a vital role in promoting fair competition and addressing anti-competitive practices within the economy. The institution has undertaken a number of important interventions to ensure market transparency and protect consumer interests. As part of an evolving regulatory landscape, ongoing efforts are focused on further strengthening institutional capacity, enhancing enforcement mechanisms, and aligning practices with international standards to support a more competitive and efficient market environment.

Barriers to entry, such as licensing requirements, capital thresholds, and regulatory approvals, further limit competitive dynamism, particularly for small and emerging enterprises.

Overall, while elements of market openness exist, structural and policy-related constraints continue to limit the depth and consistency of competition within the economy.

7.4 Labor Market Freedom

Labor market freedom reflects the ability of individuals to access employment opportunities, negotiate terms of work, and move across sectors in response to economic conditions. It also encompasses the balance between worker protections and employer flexibility.

Pakistan's labor market is characterized by a significant duality. The formal sector operates under a framework of labor laws that provide for minimum wages, workplace safety, and social protections. However, enforcement of these regulations is uneven, particularly among smaller enterprises.

Table 7.4: Labor Force Profile of Pakistan

Indicator	Latest Available Estimate	Notes / Interpretation
Total Population	~240 million	Estimated (2024–2025 projections)
Working Age Population (15+)	~150–155 million	Approx. 63–65% of total population

Total Labor Force	~71–75 million	PBS Labour Force Survey baseline (~67 million) adjusted for population growth
Labor Force Participation Rate (LFPR)	~44–46%	Relatively low compared to regional peers
Male LFPR	~65–68%	High participation among men
Female LFPR	~20–25%	Significant gender gap
Total Employed Population	~67–70 million	Majority engaged in informal sector
Unemployment Rate	~5–7%	Official rates remain moderate but underemployment is high
Youth Unemployment (15–24 years)	~8–10%	Higher in urban areas
Informal Employment Share	~70–75%	Dominant feature of labor market
Sectoral Distribution of Employment		
– Agriculture	~37–38%	Largest employer, low productivity
– Industry	~20–22%	Includes manufacturing and construction
– Services	~40–42%	Fastest growing sector
Self-Employment / Own Account Workers	~35–40%	Reflects entrepreneurial but informal activity
Wage Employees	~45–50%	Includes both formal and informal wage workers
Employers	~2–3%	Very small share
Women in Informal Employment	~75–80% of working women	Indicates vulnerability and lack of protections

The labor force data presented is primarily derived from the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics Labour Force Survey (2020–21), the latest nationally representative dataset, and has been proportionally updated using population estimates from the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA), with cross-validation from the World Bank and the International Labour Organization (ILOSTAT) to reflect current trends and ensure international comparability.

The informal sector dominates employment, encompassing a substantial portion of the workforce. Workers in this sector often lack formal contracts, social security coverage, and legal protections. While informality provides flexibility and access to livelihoods, it also limits economic security and upward mobility.

Labor regulations, in some cases, introduce rigidities that may discourage formal hiring. Complex procedures related to hiring, termination, and compliance can increase the cost of formal employment, leading businesses to rely on informal arrangements.

Gender disparities remain a critical concern. Female labor force participation in Pakistan is among the lowest globally, reflecting a combination of cultural norms, safety concerns, limited access to opportunities, and structural barriers within the labor market.

Youth unemployment and underemployment also present challenges, particularly in the context of a growing population. Skill mismatches between education systems and labor market demands further constrain productivity and economic mobility.

Despite these challenges, initiatives focused on vocational training, digital skills development, and entrepreneurship are beginning to address some of these gaps. However, scaling these efforts remains essential.

Labor market freedom in Pakistan, therefore, remains constrained by structural informality, regulatory inefficiencies, and socio-economic barriers.

7.5 Financial Inclusion

Financial inclusion is a critical enabler of economic freedom, as it determines the ability of individuals and businesses to participate in the formal economy. Access to financial services, including banking, credit, insurance, and digital payments, enhances economic resilience and supports entrepreneurship.

Pakistan's financial inclusion story is not bank-led but platform-led, driven by branchless banking and low-KYC digital wallets, with over 110 million accounts, yet only about half are actively used, highlighting a shift from access to meaningful usage.

Pakistan has made significant strides in expanding financial inclusion, particularly through digital innovation. The growth of branchless banking, mobile wallets, and fintech platforms has extended financial access to previously underserved populations. These developments have been supported by policy initiatives from the

State Bank of Pakistan, including the National Financial Inclusion Strategy.

Digital financial services have reduced transaction costs, improved accessibility, and facilitated greater participation in economic activities. They have also played an important role in government-to-person (G2P) transfers, particularly in social protection programs.

Table 7.5: Financial Accounts Landscape in Pakistan

Category	Estimated Number (Latest Available Range)
Total Bank Accounts (Commercial Banks)	~90–100 million accounts
Branchless Banking Accounts (Total Wallets)	~110–120 million accounts
Active Branchless Wallets	~55–65 million active accounts
Asaan (Basic) Bank Accounts	~7–10 million accounts
Easypaisa Registered Users	~45–50 million users
JazzCash Registered Users	~45–50 million users
Raast Registered IDs (Individuals & Merchants)	35–40 million+ IDs
Microfinance Bank Accounts	~18–22 million accounts
Adults with Any Financial Account (Bank + Wallet)	~60–65% of adult population (~75–85 million adults)
Women Account Ownership	~25–30% of total account holders

Source: State Bank of Pakistan

Pakistan's financial inclusion landscape must be interpreted with important caveats. Account figures cannot be aggregated directly, as many individuals hold multiple accounts across banks and mobile wallets, making overall adult access, estimated at around 60-65%, a more reliable indicator. The expansion of inclusion has been driven primarily by branchless banking and mobile wallet platforms rather than traditional banking institutions. However, a significant gap persists between access and usage, with only about half of registered wallets actively used. While Asaan accounts have contributed to lowering entry barriers, their scale remains smaller than often assumed. Meanwhile, Raast is rapidly emerging as a foundational digital payments infrastructure, though it has yet to achieve universal adoption.

However, inclusion remains uneven. Women, rural populations, and small businesses continue to face barriers in accessing formal financial services. Cultural norms, documentation requirements, and limited financial literacy contribute to these gaps.

Access to credit remains a particular challenge. Small and medium enterprises often lack the collateral or credit history required to secure formal financing, limiting their growth potential. Microfinance institutions have expanded outreach, but their scale and product diversity remain constrained.

The next phase of financial inclusion will require a shift from access to usage, ensuring that individuals and businesses can effectively utilize financial services to enhance productivity and economic outcomes.

7.6 Informal Economy and Barriers to Entry

The informal economy represents both an opportunity and a constraint within Pakistan's economic landscape. It provides livelihoods for millions of individuals and reflects the adaptability of economic actors in the face of systemic barriers. At the same time, it highlights structural inefficiencies that limit productivity, scalability, and state capacity.

Informality is often driven by barriers to formal entry. These include complex registration procedures, high compliance costs, regulatory uncertainty, and limited trust in public institutions. For many small businesses and entrepreneurs, operating informally represents a rational response to these constraints.

However, informality comes at a cost. Informal enterprises often lack access to formal finance, legal protections, and market opportunities. This limits their ability to grow, innovate, and integrate into broader value chains.

The persistence of informality also affects public finance, as it reduces the tax base and complicates economic planning. It creates a cycle in which limited state capacity reinforces the very conditions that

sustain informality.

Efforts to formalize the economy, through simplified tax regimes, digital registration platforms, and financial inclusion initiatives, have begun to address these challenges. However, progress remains gradual, and structural barriers continue to deter widespread formalization.

Barriers to entry are particularly pronounced for marginalized groups, including women, youth, and individuals in rural areas. Addressing these barriers requires not only regulatory reform but also targeted interventions that enhance access to capital, skills, and networks.

7.7 Economic Freedom as a Governance Imperative

Economic freedom in Pakistan is best understood as a dynamic and evolving construct. It reflects both the progress achieved through reforms and the constraints imposed by institutional and structural limitations.

Economic freedom is not solely about reducing state intervention; it is about enhancing the quality of governance. Predictability, transparency, and inclusivity are essential for enabling individuals and businesses to participate meaningfully in the economy.

Advancing economic freedom will require a coordinated approach that strengthens property rights enforcement, simplifies regulatory frameworks, promotes competition, expands financial inclusion, and integrates the informal economy into formal systems.

Ultimately, economic freedom is a measure of the state's ability to empower its citizens, not only as economic actors but as participants in a broader system of opportunity, innovation, and growth.



Chapter 8:

Gender and Freedom

8.1 Introduction: The Gendered Nature of Freedom

Freedom is not experienced uniformly across society; it is mediated by structural inequalities, social hierarchies, and institutional arrangements. Among these, gender remains one of the most pervasive and enduring determinants of how freedom is accessed, exercised, and sustained. In Pakistan, the question of freedom cannot be meaningfully examined without interrogating the gendered distribution of rights, opportunities, and agency.

While the Constitution of Pakistan provides a formal commitment to equality, the lived reality reflects a layered disparity between de jure equality and de facto inequality. Women, who constitute nearly half of the population, experience constraints across multiple domains, economic participation, political representation, mobility, access to justice, and digital inclusion. These constraints are not isolated; rather, they are interconnected and mutually reinforcing, creating a systemic limitation on freedom.

This chapter conceptualizes gender and freedom through three interlinked lenses:

- Agency: The ability to make independent decisions about one's life
- Access: The availability of resources, opportunities, and services
- Security: Freedom from violence, coercion, and discrimination

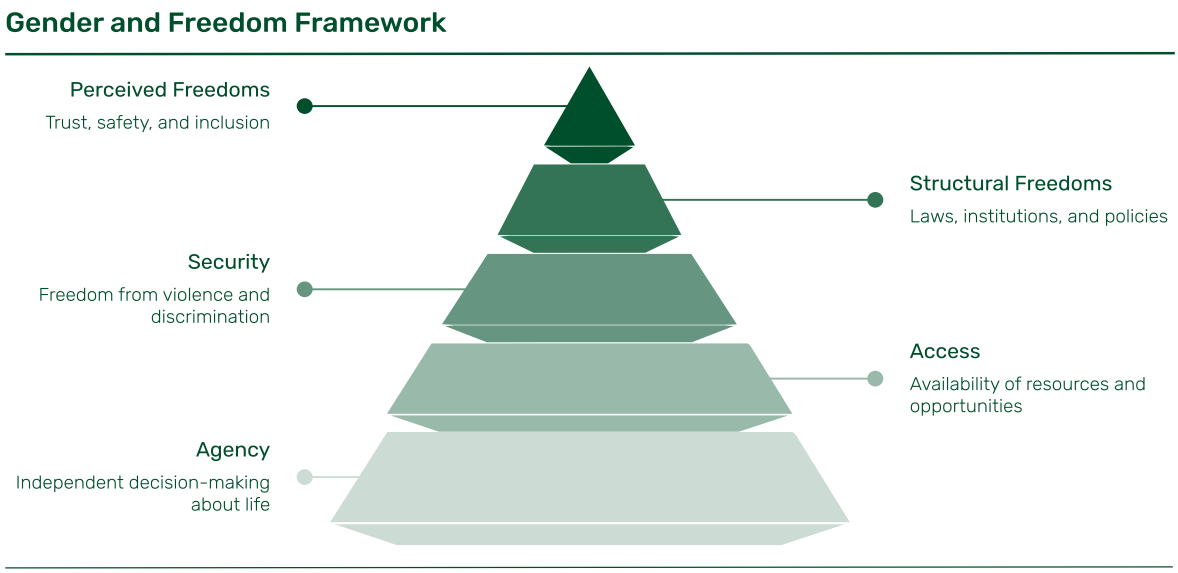


Figure : Gender and Freedom Framework, The Freedom Report 2026

Using this framework, the chapter examines how gender shapes both structural freedoms (laws, institutions, policies) and perceived freedoms (trust, safety, inclusion), drawing on the Trust Survey, national data, and international benchmarks.

8.2 Constitutional and Legal Architecture: Between Promise and Practice

Pakistan's constitutional and legal architecture provides a strong normative foundation for gender equality, positioning it as a state commitment embedded within the broader framework of fundamental rights. However, the translation of these constitutional guarantees into lived realities remains uneven, shaped by institutional capacity, governance effectiveness, and deeply embedded social norms. The Constitution articulates a clear vision of equality, yet the realization of that vision depends not only on legal provisions but also on enforcement mechanisms and societal acceptance.

At the constitutional level, several provisions establish the legal basis for gender equality. Article 25(1) and (2) guarantee equality before the law and explicitly prohibit discrimination on the basis of sex, affirming that all citizens are entitled to equal protection. At the same time, Article 25(3) introduces a critical nuance by permitting affirmative action, enabling the state to enact special measures to protect women and children and address historical disadvantages. This reflects a hybrid constitutional approach that balances formal equality with corrective justice. Further strengthening this framework, Article 34 directs the state to ensure the full participation of women in all spheres of national life, while Article 37(e) emphasizes the provision of humane working conditions, including maternity benefits. Collectively, these provisions signal a progressive constitutional intent that recognizes both equality and equity as essential to social justice.

Building upon its constitutional commitments, Pakistan has introduced a range of legislative reforms over the past two decades to address gender-based inequalities and violence. These include measures to protect women in the workplace, strengthen legal responses to honor-based crimes, reform laws related to sexual violence, and establish safeguards against domestic violence at the provincial level. Additional initiatives have focused on securing women's inheritance and property rights, contributing to greater economic inclusion.

These developments reflect a growing policy focus and institutional commitment to advancing gender equality. At the same time, following the 18th Constitutional Amendment, many gender-related laws fall within provincial jurisdiction, allowing regions to tailor frameworks according to local contexts and priorities. While this has encouraged innovation and responsiveness, it has also led to variations in legal provisions and implementation approaches across provinces. As a result, ongoing efforts are increasingly directed toward enhancing coordination and harmonization to ensure more consistent protection and opportunities for women nationwide.

While Pakistan has made notable progress in enacting progressive laws, the translation of these frameworks into consistent outcomes remains an ongoing area of focus. Strengthening implementation mechanisms continues to be a priority, particularly in enhancing the capacity of law enforcement institutions through improved training, resource allocation, and institutional processes. Efforts are underway to promote greater gender sensitivity, streamline procedures, and encourage reporting, with the aim of ensuring that legal protections are effectively accessible. Bridging the gap between legislation and implementation is essential for reinforcing public confidence and enabling more individuals, especially women, to seek timely and

effective legal recourse.

A second critical challenge is the continued influence of parallel informal justice systems, such as jirgas and panchayats, particularly in rural and semi-urban areas. These systems, while socially embedded, often operate outside the constitutional framework and may reinforce patriarchal norms, at times overriding formal legal protections. Their existence reflects not only cultural continuity but also gaps in the accessibility and credibility of formal judicial institutions.

Finally, improving the efficiency of judicial processes remains an important area of focus in enhancing access to justice. Procedural timelines, legal costs, and administrative complexities can, at times, present challenges, particularly for individuals with limited resources or support systems. Ongoing reforms and modernization efforts are increasingly aimed at streamlining court procedures, reducing delays, and strengthening the overall responsiveness of the legal system, thereby reinforcing its effectiveness and accessibility for all citizens.

Taken together, these dynamics reflect an important transition: Pakistan's constitutional and legal framework provides a strong foundation, with ongoing efforts focused on translating these principles more consistently into practice. While the realization of rights continues to evolve, this process highlights the need for continued institutional strengthening, enhanced coordination across governance structures, and sustained societal engagement. Advancing these areas will further support the effective implementation of legal protections and reinforce gender equality as a practical and widely experienced reality.

8.3 Economic Freedom: Structural Exclusion and Emerging Pathways

Economic freedom lies at the heart of individual autonomy, shaping the ability to make independent life choices, access resources, and participate meaningfully in society. In Pakistan, however, gender disparities reveal a deeply segmented economic structure where women's participation is constrained not only by limited opportunities but also by systemic invisibility within formal economic frameworks. While women contribute significantly to household and national productivity, their role remains underrecognized, undervalued, and under-measured, creating a disconnect between economic contribution and economic empowerment.

A defining feature of gender inequality in Pakistan's economy is the persistently low level of female labor force participation, which remains well below global and regional averages. Women's economic activity is largely concentrated in the informal sector, particularly in agriculture, livestock management, and home-based production such as handicrafts and piece-rate work. While these contributions are vital to household incomes and rural economies, they are seldom recorded in formal statistics or protected under labor regulations. Consequently, many working women remain outside the scope of formal employment structures, with limited access to contracts, social protection, minimum wage guarantees, and workplace rights. Their marginal presence in high-growth sectors such as technology, finance, manufacturing, and formal services further restricts their ability to benefit from economic transformation, reinforcing a system where participation does not translate into recognition or advancement.

This structural imbalance is compounded by significant measurement gaps. Official data systems, including the Labour Force Survey conducted by the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, do not fully account for the scale of women's engagement in informal and unpaid work. A substantial portion of women's contributions, particularly within the care economy, remains unrecorded, as many either exit formal employment or never enter it due to responsibilities such as childcare, eldercare, and support for dependent family members. This invisibility in data not only distorts national assessments of labor and productivity but also affects Pakistan's standing in global benchmarks. Indices such as the Global Gender Gap Index by the World Economic Forum rely heavily on formal labor participation and income metrics, meaning that uncounted contributions translate directly into lower rankings, further masking the true extent of women's role in the economy.

Within the formal economy, gender disparities continue to be an area of policy attention, particularly in relation to wage differentials and sectoral distribution. Women are more prominently represented in sectors such as education, healthcare, and textiles, which, while vital to the economy, may offer comparatively limited pathways for income growth and career advancement. Efforts to promote wage equity and improve enforcement mechanisms are gradually gaining traction, alongside initiatives aimed at expanding opportunities across a broader range of industries.

At the same time, increasing women's representation in leadership and decision-making roles remains an ongoing priority. While progress has been observed, women continue to be underrepresented in senior management, corporate boards, and entrepreneurial ecosystems. Addressing these gaps through targeted policies, capacity-building, and institutional support is essential to further enhance economic inclusion, strengthen financial independence, and enable greater participation of women in shaping economic outcomes.

In recent years, Pakistan has made measurable progress in expanding financial inclusion, particularly through the growth of branchless banking, mobile wallets, and real-time payment systems such as Raast. These developments have the potential to transform economic access by reducing reliance on physical banking infrastructure and enabling digital transactions at scale. However, a significant gender gap persists within this evolving financial landscape. Women are less likely to own bank accounts, more likely to face barriers in accessing formal credit, and often lack the digital literacy required to fully utilize financial technologies. Structural issues such as lack of collateral, limited asset ownership, and documentation constraints further restrict women's ability to engage with formal financial systems. While digital finance offers a pathway to bypass traditional barriers, its impact remains uneven without targeted, gender-responsive policies that address both access and capability.

Taken together, these structural factors, such as informality, wage differentials, financial access, and the recognition of unpaid work, highlight areas where continued policy focus can further enhance women's economic participation and autonomy. At the same time, important opportunities for progress are emerging. The expansion of digital finance, growing support for women's entrepreneurship, and increasing recognition of the care economy offer pathways to strengthen inclusion and broaden economic engagement.

Realizing this potential will benefit from sustained efforts toward more inclusive economic policies that better recognize, measure, and support women's contributions. Advancing these priorities can help ensure that economic growth is more balanced and widely shared, enabling a greater proportion of the population to participate fully in and benefit from the country's economic development.

8.4 Political Freedom

Political participation is a foundational element of democratic freedom, enabling citizens to influence governance, shape policy outcomes, and hold institutions accountable. In Pakistan, important institutional mechanisms have been introduced to enhance women's political inclusion, most notably through reserved seats in legislative bodies. While these measures have ensured a baseline level of representation, a significant gap remains between numerical inclusion and substantive influence, raising critical questions about the depth and quality of women's political freedom.

The system of reserved representation has played a significant role in enhancing the presence of women in national and provincial assemblies, reflecting Pakistan's commitment to institutionalizing gender inclusion within its political framework. By allocating dedicated seats, the system has ensured that women are consistently represented in legislative processes and national decision-making forums.

The mechanism of party nomination for reserved seats provides an organized pathway for inclusion, enabling political parties to bring forward diverse female voices and perspectives. While many women enter through this route, their participation contributes to legislative deliberations, policy development, and advocacy on key social and economic issues. Over time, this model has supported the gradual strengthening of women's political engagement, with increasing opportunities for influence within party structures and parliamentary processes.

As the system continues to evolve, there is growing emphasis on further enhancing the depth of participation and leadership roles for women, ensuring that representation translates into meaningful contributions to governance and policy outcomes.

Table 8.4a: Women Legislators in Pakistan's National and Provincial Assemblies

Assembly	Total Seats	Reserved Seats for Women	Women Elected on General Seats	Total Women Members	% Representation
National Assembly	336	60	8	68	20.2%
Punjab Assembly	371	66	6	72	19.4%
Sindh Assembly	168	29	3	32	19.0%
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Assembly	145	26	2	28	19.3%
Balochistan Assembly	65	11	1	12	18.5%

Source: The data on women's representation in Pakistan's national and provincial assemblies is based on official seat allocations and post-election membership records published by the Election Commission of Pakistan and respective legislative assemblies.

Beyond legislative representation, women's participation in the electoral process continues to receive focused attention as part of broader efforts to strengthen inclusive democracy. While progress has been

made in increasing female voter registration and turnout, variations persist across regions, influenced by a combination of socio-cultural dynamics and logistical considerations. Factors such as access to polling stations, transportation, and local conditions can shape participation levels, particularly in more remote areas.

In recent years, electoral authorities have taken proactive steps to address these challenges through targeted voter registration drives, enhanced oversight, and measures to ensure greater accessibility and security at polling stations. Practices that previously limited participation are increasingly being addressed through regulatory enforcement and public awareness initiatives. As a result, there is a growing emphasis on ensuring that women's political participation is not only guaranteed in principle but also supported in practice, enabling more inclusive and representative electoral processes.

Table 8.4b: Voter Data by Sex (Province-wise) – General Elections 2024

Province / Region	Male Registered (M)	Female Registered (M)	Total Registered (M)	Female Share (%)	Votes Cast Male (M)	Votes Cast Female (M)	Female Turnout (%)
Punjab	41.5	36.0	77.5	~46%	18.5	15.8	~44%
Sindh	14.5	12.0	26.5	~45%	6.3	5.2	~41%
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	10.5	8.5	19.0	~45%	4.8	3.9	~41%
Balochistan	2.8	2.2	5.0	~44%	1.3	1.0	~40%
Islamabad (ICT)	0.9	0.8	1.7	~47%	0.4	0.35	~41%
Total Pakistan	73.4	62.8	136.2	~46%	32.5	26.0	~41%

Source: Data compiled from official releases of the Election Commission of Pakistan (General Elections 2024).

The relationship between representation and influence continues to evolve, particularly in the context of leadership and decision-making roles. While women's presence in legislative assemblies has improved, their participation in cabinet-level positions, senior party leadership, and key policy-making bodies is an area where further progress is being pursued. Translating representation into broader executive roles and strategic influence remains an important focus for strengthening inclusive governance.

Enhancing women's involvement in decision-making processes can contribute to more diverse and responsive policy outcomes, including in areas such as economic planning, security, and governance reform. Ongoing efforts to expand leadership opportunities and build institutional pathways are aimed at ensuring that women's contributions are increasingly reflected across all levels of governance, reinforcing both representation and impact.

Table 8.4c: Women in Cabinets – Federal and Provincial Governments

Government Level	Total Executive (Cabinet + MoS)	Women (Cabinet Ministers)	Women (Ministers of State)	Total Women	% Representation
Federal Government	~45–50	2	2–3	~4–5	~9–10%
Punjab	~40–45	3	N/A	3	~6–7%
Sindh	~18–20	2	N/A	2	~10–11%
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	~20–25	1	N/A	1	~4–5%
Balochistan	~15–20	1	N/A	1	~5–6%
Azad Jammu & Kashmir (AJK)	~20–25	1	N/A	1	~4–5%
Gilgit-Baltistan (GB)	~15–18	1	N/A	1	~5–6%

The figures on women's representation in federal, provincial, and regional executive governments (including Cabinet Ministers and Ministers of State) are compiled from official government notifications, cabinet divisions, and publicly available records from the respective institutions.

A critical yet often underexamined factor in this dynamic is the weakness of local government systems. Local governance structures serve as the primary entry point for grassroots political participation, offering

opportunities for community engagement, leadership development, and direct interaction with governance processes. In Pakistan, the inconsistent presence or limited functionality of local governments has disproportionately affected women's political participation. Without accessible local platforms, women face higher barriers to entering politics, as national and provincial levels remain distant, resource-intensive, and often dominated by established political networks. The absence of strong local governance thus centralizes political power and reduces pathways for women to build political capital from the ground up.

Taken together, these dynamics highlight an important phase in the evolution of Pakistan's political landscape. Institutional frameworks have made meaningful progress in expanding representation, while ongoing efforts are focused on further addressing structural, cultural, and systemic factors that influence women's political empowerment. The transition from representation to broader participation and influence remains a key area of development in strengthening inclusive governance.

Advancing this trajectory will benefit from sustained support for representation mechanisms, alongside continued efforts to enhance electoral participation, expand leadership pathways, and strengthen local governance structures. These measures can help deepen political inclusion, enabling it to evolve from a procedural achievement into a more substantive and widely experienced dimension of democratic engagement.

8.5 Social Freedom: Mobility, Education, and Normative Constraints

Social freedom represents a key dimension of everyday life, shaping how individuals access opportunities, participate in society, and exercise personal agency. In Pakistan, women's social experiences are shaped by a dynamic interplay of institutional frameworks and evolving societal norms. While legal and policy structures provide a strong foundation for equality, factors such as mobility, access to education, and cultural contexts continue to influence how these rights are experienced in practice. Ongoing efforts across policy, community engagement, and social development are gradually expanding opportunities and supporting more inclusive participation for women across different spheres of life.

A central component of social freedom is mobility and access to public space, which continues to evolve across Pakistan. While progress has been made, experiences vary by region, with factors such as safety perceptions, infrastructure, and local social norms influencing patterns of movement. In some areas, cultural practices may encourage accompanied mobility, particularly in more traditional settings, while in others, increasing urbanization and policy initiatives are supporting greater independence.

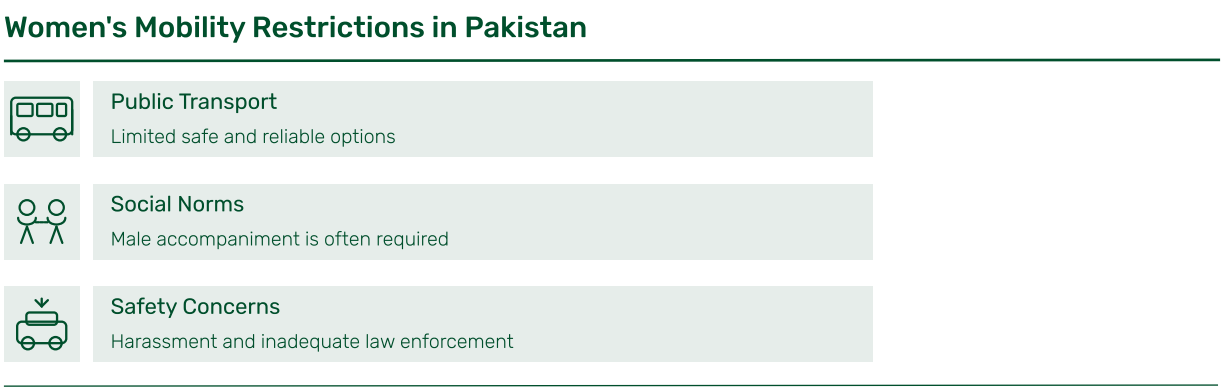


*Figure SEQ Figure * ARABIC 22: Women's Mobility Restrictions in Pakistan, The Freedom Report 2026*

The government has increasingly prioritized improvements in public safety and transport infrastructure, including efforts to enhance security measures and develop more accessible and gender-sensitive transit options. Continued investment in these areas is aimed at expanding safe and reliable mobility, recognizing its importance in enabling broader access to education, employment, healthcare, and civic participation. In this context, mobility remains a key enabler of opportunity, with ongoing reforms contributing to more inclusive and connected social participation.

A notable and encouraging development in recent years has been the increasing visibility of women using e-bikes, which reflects a gradual shift in social norms and greater mobility. Government-led initiatives, particularly in provinces such as Punjab and Sindh, have actively supported this transition. For instance, the Government of Punjab has introduced schemes to provide subsidized or free electric bikes to female students, aimed at improving access to education and safe transportation. Similarly, in Sindh, pilot programs and policy discussions have focused on expanding women's access to affordable and independent mobility solutions, including electric scooters.

These initiatives serve as important indicators of change, demonstrating how targeted public policy can help women overcome traditional mobility barriers and participate more actively in education, employment, and public life. The growing acceptance of women riding e-bikes not only enhances physical mobility but also symbolizes a broader shift toward empowerment and inclusion, supported by both state interventions and evolving societal attitudes.

Education remains a fundamental enabler of social and economic advancement, with the capacity to shape individual opportunities and contribute to broader societal development. In Pakistan, sustained policy focus and investment have led to notable improvements in primary school enrollment for girls, reflecting a strong commitment to expanding access to basic education.

As the education system continues to evolve, attention is increasingly being directed toward improving retention at secondary and tertiary levels. Factors such as access, infrastructure, affordability, and social context can influence educational continuity, particularly in certain regions. In response, both federal and provincial initiatives are working to address these challenges through targeted programs, enhanced facilities, and support mechanisms aimed at encouraging continued participation.

Efforts are also underway to strengthen the quality of education and better align learning outcomes with market-relevant skills, ensuring that educational attainment translates into meaningful opportunities. Despite existing challenges, education continues to serve as a critical pathway for empowerment, supporting greater economic participation, awareness, and the gradual transformation of societal perceptions around women's roles.

Table 8.5: Female Education Enrollment & Dropout Rates

Province / Region	Primary Enrollment (%)	Primary Dropout (%)	Secondary Enrollment %	Secondary Dropout %	Tertiary Enrollment (%)	Tertiary Dropout (%)
Punjab	72%	18%	52%	28%	14%	20%
Sindh	65%	25%	45%	32%	12%	22%
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	68%	22%	48%	30%	10%	24%
Balochistan	45%	35%	28%	45%	6%	30%
Islamabad (ICT)	85%	10%	70%	18%	25%	12%
Gilgit-Baltistan (GB)	70%	20%	50%	28%	12%	20%
Azad Jammu & Kashmir (AJK)	78%	15%	60%	22%	18%	15%
Pakistan Average	~69%	~21%	~48%	~31%	~13%	~21%

Underlying both mobility and education are evolving cultural norms and patterns of socialization that influence gender roles from an early age. In many parts of Pakistan, these norms have traditionally emphasized family and domestic responsibilities, which can shape decisions around education, career pathways, and public engagement. At the same time, there is a growing shift, supported by policy initiatives, awareness campaigns, and community engagement, toward expanding opportunities and encouraging broader participation for women.

Factors such as early marriage and social expectations can, in some contexts, affect educational and professional continuity. However, increasing attention at both governmental and societal levels is being directed toward addressing these issues through legal reforms, advocacy, and improved access to education and support systems. As these efforts continue, there is a gradual but visible transformation in perceptions, contributing to more inclusive roles for women across social and professional spheres.

Taken together, factors such as mobility, access to education, and evolving cultural norms shape the lived experiences of women's social freedom in Pakistan. While meaningful progress is visible, particularly in policy direction and expanded access to basic education, there remains continued scope to further strengthen inclusion and opportunity across different segments of society.

Addressing these areas is increasingly being approached through a combination of institutional initiatives, community engagement, and awareness efforts. As these measures advance, there is a growing recognition of the importance of supporting women's autonomy and participation as a key component of both individual well-being and broader national development.

8.6 Freedom from Violence: The Core Constraint

Any comprehensive discussion of freedom necessarily includes the dimension of personal security. In

Pakistan, ensuring the safety and well-being of women remains an important policy priority, with continued efforts to address gender-based violence (GBV) and its impact on everyday life. Beyond being a rights concern, issues related to safety can influence patterns of mobility, participation, and access to opportunities across social, economic, and public spheres. As such, strengthening protective mechanisms and support systems is central to enhancing lived experiences of freedom.

Pakistan has developed an extensive legal and institutional framework aimed at the protection of women's rights, safety, workplace participation, inheritance rights, political representation, and protection against violence and harassment. These protections exist at both the federal and provincial levels, with several laws introduced or strengthened over the past two decades. Some of the major laws and protections include:

Constitutional Protections

The Constitution of Pakistan guarantees equality before law, non-discrimination, dignity of individuals, and protection of fundamental rights for women under various constitutional provisions, including Articles 8, 25, 34, and 35.

Key Federal Laws for Women Protection

Law	Purpose
Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act	Protects women from workplace harassment and establishes inquiry mechanisms in organizations
Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act	Addresses domestic violence and provides protection mechanisms for victims
Anti-Rape (Investigation and Trial) Act	Introduced special procedures for rape investigations and speedy trials
Protection of Women (Criminal Laws Amendment) Act	Reformed certain provisions affecting women under criminal law
Prevention of Anti-Women Practices Act	Criminalizes practices such as forced marriage, denial of inheritance, and marriage to the Quran
Acid Control and Acid Crime Prevention Act	Strengthens punishment for acid attacks
Benazir Income Support Programme Act	Provides financial support primarily targeted toward women from low-income households

Provincial Legislation

Pakistan's provinces have also enacted women protection laws, including:

» Domestic violence protection laws

» Women protection centers and shelters

» Gender-based violence response units

» Workplace harassment enforcement mechanisms

» Women property and inheritance protection initiatives

For example:

» Punjab Protection of Women Against Violence Act

» Sindh Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act

» Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Domestic Violence Against Women Act

Institutional Mechanisms

Pakistan also has dedicated institutions working on women's rights and gender protection, including:

» National Commission on the Status of Women

» Provincial Commissions on the Status of Women

» Women police stations and gender desks

» Special courts and protection centers in some provinces

» Helplines and crisis response services

Political Representation

Pakistan maintains reserved seats for women in:

» National Assembly

» Senate

» Provincial Assemblies

» Local governments

This has resulted in one of the larger formal female parliamentary representations in South Asia.

Ongoing Challenges

While the legal framework has expanded considerably, implementation capacity, social norms, access to justice, awareness, and enforcement consistency remain areas of continued policy focus and reform discussions. The government, judiciary, civil society organizations, media, and international development partners continue to work on strengthening institutional effectiveness and gender inclusion across sectors.

In addition to these constitutional protections and legislative measures, the Government of Pakistan has also established a range of institutional mechanisms and support services aimed at strengthening the protection, safety, and access to justice for women and children. These include the establishment of dedicated Women Police Stations in various cities to provide a more accessible and gender-sensitive environment for reporting harassment, violence, and other crimes involving women.

The government has also established the Zainab Alert Response and Recovery Agency (ZARRA), which operates under the Zainab Alert, Response and Recovery Act to support rapid response, recovery coordination, and public alert mechanisms in cases involving missing and abducted children. In parallel, various federal and provincial authorities operate women protection centers, crisis response units, gender desks, helplines, and legal assistance services aimed at improving victim support, emergency response, and coordination between law enforcement and social welfare institutions.

These initiatives reflect broader state efforts to strengthen institutional responsiveness, improve public safety mechanisms, and enhance protections for vulnerable groups through both legal reforms and administrative support systems.

Gender-based violence can take multiple forms across private, public, and increasingly digital spaces. Domestic and interpersonal challenges, workplace harassment, and the emergence of online abuse in a rapidly digitizing environment are areas that have received growing attention from policymakers and institutions. Legal frameworks, awareness initiatives, and support services have been expanded in recent years to address these concerns, alongside efforts to encourage reporting and improve response mechanisms. Collectively, these measures reflect a broader commitment to creating safer environments, while ongoing reforms continue to strengthen protection, prevention, and redressal systems across the country.

Table 8.6a: Gender-Based Violence, Online Harassment, and Crimes Against Women

Category	Reported Cases	Resolved Cases	Pending Cases	Resolution Rate (%)
Domestic Violence & Intimate Partner Violence	~35,000	~12,000	~23,000	~34%
Honor-Based Crimes	~1,000	~400	~600	~40%
Rape & Sexual Assault Cases	~6,500	~1,800	~4,700	~28%
Workplace Harassment Complaints	~2,500	~1,200	~1,300	~48%
Online Harassment & Cyber Crimes (FIA + NCCIA)	~28,000	~10,500	~17,500	~37%
Kidnapping/Abduction of Women	~18,000	~9,000	~9,000	~50%
Total (Approx.)	~91,000	~34,900	~56,100	~38%

Sources: National Cyber Crime Investigation Agency - Cybercrime Complaints & Investigation Data , Federal Investigation Agency - Cyber Crime Wing Reports, Human Rights Commission of Pakistan - State of Human Rights Reports, National Police Bureau - Crime Statistics, Provincial Police Departments - Gender Crime Data

Table 8.6b: Crimes Against Women & GBV – Province-wise

Province / Region	Estimated Reported Cases	Share of National Total (%)	Dominant Categories
Punjab	~55,000	~60%	Domestic violence, abduction, rape
Sindh	~18,000	~20%	Domestic violence, honor crimes, urban harassment
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	~10,000	~11%	Domestic violence, honor-based cases
Balochistan	~3,500	~4%	Underreported GBV, honor-based violence

Islamabad (ICT)	~2,500	~3%	Cyber harassment, workplace harassment
Gilgit-Baltistan (GB)	~1,200	~1%	Domestic violence (underreported)
Azad Jammu & Kashmir (AJK)	~1,800	~2%	Domestic violence, family disputes
Total Pakistan	~91,000	100%	—

Province-wise disaggregation of gender-based violence data in Pakistan remains limited due to fragmented reporting systems across federal and provincial institutions. While reported cases indicate concentration in Punjab and urban centers, lower figures in smaller provinces likely reflect underreporting rather than lower incidence.

While legal protections are in place, strengthening access to justice remains an ongoing priority, shaped by a range of social and institutional factors. In some cases, individuals may be hesitant to pursue formal legal remedies due to concerns related to social sensitivities, personal circumstances, or potential repercussions. Efforts are increasingly focused on encouraging reporting and building confidence in formal systems through awareness initiatives and supportive frameworks.

At the institutional level, continued emphasis is being placed on enhancing the capacity and responsiveness of law enforcement agencies, including through gender-sensitive training and improved procedures for handling complaints. The expansion of support services, such as shelters, legal aid, and counseling, is also receiving growing attention to ensure more comprehensive assistance for affected individuals. At the same time, community-based resolution practices remain part of the broader social landscape, with ongoing efforts to align such approaches more closely with formal legal standards and principles of justice.

Institutional responses to GBV have evolved over time, with the establishment of specialized mechanisms such as women police stations, gender desks, and protection centers aimed at providing safer and more accessible reporting channels. Legislative reforms and policy initiatives have also sought to strengthen the legal framework around violence against women. However, these efforts are frequently constrained by limited resources, uneven geographic coverage, and weak inter-agency coordination. Many support services are concentrated in urban centers, leaving rural populations with limited access. Fragmentation across federal and provincial jurisdictions further complicates implementation, leading to inconsistencies in service delivery and enforcement.

The continued focus on addressing gender-based violence highlights an important dimension of the broader freedom landscape: the effective realization of rights is closely linked to a sense of safety and security. While legal and institutional frameworks provide a strong foundation, their full impact is strengthened when individuals are able to exercise these rights with confidence and without concern. In this context, personal security serves as an essential enabler of wider social, economic, and civic participation.

Ongoing efforts are therefore increasingly directed toward addressing underlying factors, ranging from social dynamics to institutional capacity, through a combination of legal reforms, awareness initiatives, and strengthened support systems. Advancing these areas will further support gender equality and empowerment, enabling women to participate more fully in society and contribute to national development in a meaningful and sustained manner.

8.7 Digital Freedom: Opportunity vs Exclusion

The rapid expansion of the digital ecosystem has reshaped the contours of freedom in the 21st century, opening new avenues for participation, expression, and economic engagement. In Pakistan, digital technologies are increasingly being leveraged as tools of empowerment, particularly for women, by enhancing access to information, markets, and professional networks.

At the same time, as the digital space continues to evolve, it also reflects broader societal dynamics, including existing disparities. Recognizing this, policymakers and stakeholders are placing growing emphasis on ensuring that digital inclusion is both accessible and safe, with measures aimed at addressing emerging risks and promoting responsible use. In this context, digital freedom represents a dynamic and evolving domain, one that offers significant opportunities while also requiring thoughtful governance to ensure equitable and secure participation for all.

On the opportunity side, digital platforms have significantly expanded access to education and skill development, particularly through online learning resources, virtual classrooms, and remote training programs. For women who face mobility restrictions or social barriers to attending physical institutions, digital education provides an alternative pathway to knowledge acquisition and professional development. Similarly, the rise of remote work and freelancing has enabled women to participate in the labor market from within their homes, bypassing traditional constraints related to commuting, workplace environments, and

social norms. This has been particularly visible in sectors such as digital services, content creation, and online consulting.

Digital technologies have also opened new avenues for entrepreneurship and financial inclusion. E-commerce platforms and social media marketplaces allow women to establish small businesses, market products, and reach customers beyond their immediate geographic surroundings. Coupled with the growth of digital payment systems, these platforms can facilitate greater financial autonomy and economic participation. In addition, online spaces serve as platforms for expression, advocacy, and networking, enabling women to share experiences, build communities, and engage in public discourse in ways that may be constrained in offline settings.

Table 8.7: Gender Division in Digital Access

Indicator	Male (%)	Female (%)	Gender Gap (Percentage Points)	Key Insight
Mobile Phone Ownership	~85%	~65%	~20 pp	Women significantly less likely to own personal devices
Smartphone Ownership	~60%	~35–40%	~20–25 pp	Smartphone gap is wider than basic phone access
Internet Users	~55%	~30–35%	~20–25 pp	Nearly half as many women use the internet compared to men
Mobile Internet Usage	~50%	~28–30%	~20+ pp	Reflects affordability + literacy constraints
Social Media Users	~70%	~30%	~40 pp	Strong gender skew in visibility and digital expression
Digital Financial Services (Mobile Wallets)	~35%	~15–20%	~15–20 pp	Women lag in financial inclusion despite growth
Freelance/Digital Work Participation	~75–80%	~20–25%	~50+ pp	Major gender imbalance in digital economy participation

Sources: Pakistan Telecommunication Authority - Telecom Indicators, GSMA - Mobile Gender Gap Report, World Bank - Digital Development Data, DataReportal - Pakistan Digital Reports.

Despite these opportunities, significant constraints continue to limit women's ability to fully benefit from the digital ecosystem. A central challenge is the gender digital divide, reflected in disparities in access to mobile devices, internet connectivity, and digital literacy. Women in Pakistan are 20% less likely than men to own smartphones, use the internet regularly, or possess the skills required to navigate digital platforms effectively. These gaps are particularly pronounced in rural areas and among lower-income populations, where affordability, infrastructure, and social norms intersect to restrict access.

The digital space also introduces new forms of vulnerability, particularly in the form of online harassment, cyberstalking, and digital abuse. Women who engage in online platforms, whether for professional, social, or political purposes, often face threats, intimidation, and reputational attacks. Such experiences not only discourage participation but can also lead to self-censorship, limiting the very freedoms that digital platforms are meant to enable. Concerns around privacy and surveillance, both at the societal and institutional level, further complicate the landscape, particularly for women expressing dissenting views or engaging in advocacy.

Cultural norms continue to influence patterns of digital access and usage across different communities in Pakistan. In certain contexts, considerations related to social values and family practices may shape how and when technology is used, which can affect levels of access and engagement. These dynamics, alongside economic and infrastructural factors, contribute to variations in digital participation.

As a result, the digital divide reflects a combination of technological, economic, and social dimensions. Recognizing this, ongoing efforts are increasingly focused on promoting inclusive access, enhancing digital literacy, and encouraging broader participation, particularly among women, to ensure that the benefits of digital transformation are more widely shared.

Ultimately, digital freedom in Pakistan reflects an evolving landscape shaped by both expanding opportunities and ongoing efforts toward greater inclusion. Technology continues to open new avenues for women's participation in education, the economy, and public life, although the extent of these benefits can vary across different segments of society.

Bridging these gaps is increasingly being addressed through a combination of infrastructure development and targeted policy initiatives focused on affordability, digital literacy, safety, and broader accessibility. As these efforts progress, there is growing potential to ensure that the digital transformation contributes to more inclusive growth, enabling women to participate more fully in the emerging digital economy and society.

8.8 Perception Analysis: Trust, Safety, and Opportunity

Perceptions of freedom are as important as formal indicators, as they reflect how individuals experience and interpret their rights within everyday life. The Trust Survey conducted for this report provides valuable insight into how gender and freedom are understood across different segments of society in Pakistan. It captures not only institutional performance but also social attitudes, revealing gaps between policy frameworks and lived realities. The findings point toward a society navigating a complex transition, where awareness and expectations around gender equality are evolving, but institutional and structural responses remain uneven.

A dominant theme emerging from the survey is the widespread perception of unequal economic opportunity. Respondents across regions and demographics consistently indicated that women face greater barriers in accessing employment, income generation, and career advancement. These perceptions align with structural realities such as low female labor force participation, occupational segregation, and wage disparities. Importantly, the perception of inequality is not limited to women alone; it is increasingly recognized across society, suggesting a growing awareness of gender-based economic exclusion. This indicates that while economic structures remain unequal, societal recognition of the problem is strengthening, a critical first step toward reform.

Equally important is the perception of safety for women in public spaces, which emerged as a recurring theme in the survey findings. Respondents noted factors such as public trust, the need for enhanced security measures, and the role of law enforcement in shaping these perceptions. Beyond physical considerations, these perceptions can also influence confidence and patterns of mobility, with implications for participation in employment and social activities.

Recognizing this, there is increasing policy focus on improving public safety infrastructure, strengthening law enforcement responsiveness, and expanding secure and accessible transport options. These efforts reflect a broader understanding that a strong sense of safety is an essential enabler of participation, supporting women's engagement across social, economic, and public spheres.

This variation between legal awareness and institutional confidence underscores the ongoing efforts to enhance governance effectiveness. Strengthening institutional capacity, responsiveness, and public engagement remains central to ensuring that legal provisions translate more fully into lived outcomes, reinforcing trust in the justice system and the overall effectiveness of rights.

A particularly important finding is the presence of a generational divide in attitudes toward gender equality. Younger respondents, especially those with higher levels of education and digital exposure, demonstrate stronger support for women's rights, economic participation, and public visibility. They are more likely to challenge traditional norms and view gender equality as integral to social and economic development. In contrast, older generations tend to reflect more conservative perspectives, shaped by established cultural and social frameworks. This generational shift suggests that Pakistan is undergoing a gradual transformation in social attitudes, driven by education, urbanization, and digital connectivity.

Taken together, these perception patterns highlight a critical dynamic: attitudinal change is advancing more rapidly than institutional reform. Society appears increasingly aware of gender disparities and more supportive of equality, yet structural barriers and governance limitations continue to constrain progress. This divergence creates both tension and opportunity. On one hand, rising expectations may lead to greater demand for accountability and reform. On the other, the inability of institutions to respond effectively could deepen public perception.

Ultimately, the perception analysis underscores that freedom is not only about formal rights or measurable indicators but also about confidence in systems, sense of safety, and belief in opportunity. For gender equality to translate into meaningful freedom, institutional performance must align with evolving societal expectations. Bridging this gap will be essential for sustaining progress and ensuring that changes in perception are matched by tangible improvements in outcomes.

8.9 Policy Pathways: Toward Gendered Freedom

Achieving meaningful gender-based freedom in Pakistan requires more than isolated interventions; it demands a systemic, multi-sectoral, and sustained policy approach that aligns legal frameworks, economic structures, social norms, and institutional capacity. The analysis across this report highlights that while progress has been made in legislation and awareness, gaps persist in implementation, access, and outcomes. Bridging these gaps requires coordinated reforms that not only expand opportunities for women but also address the structural constraints that limit their ability to exercise freedom.

A. Institutional Strengthening

At the core of gendered freedom lies the effectiveness of institutions responsible for protecting rights and

delivering justice. Strengthening these institutions requires the integration of gender-sensitive policing practices, including specialized training for law enforcement officials to handle gender-based violence (GBV) cases with sensitivity and professionalism. The establishment and expansion of fast-track courts for GBV-related cases can significantly reduce delays and improve access to justice. In parallel, institutional coordination between police, judiciary, health services, and social protection systems must be enhanced to create a holistic response framework. Accountability mechanisms, data transparency, and monitoring systems should be strengthened to ensure that legal protections translate into real outcomes.

B. Economic Inclusion

Economic empowerment is a critical pillar of freedom, and policies must focus on expanding women's participation in both formal and informal economies. This includes targeted financial inclusion programs that promote women's access to bank accounts, credit, and digital financial services. Given the scale of women's contribution to unpaid and informal labor, there is a pressing need to recognize and integrate unpaid care work into economic policy frameworks, including through time-use surveys, social protection schemes, and care infrastructure investments such as childcare services. Additionally, incentives for women-led enterprises, support for home-based workers, and pathways into high-growth sectors can help reduce structural inequalities in economic participation.

C. Political Empowerment

While Pakistan has made progress in ensuring women's representation through reserved seats, the next phase of reform must focus on enhancing substantive political participation and influence. Strengthening local government systems is particularly important, as they serve as the primary entry point for grassroots political engagement and leadership development for women. Policies should also encourage women's participation in direct electoral contests, reducing over-reliance on party nominations and enhancing accountability to constituents. Capacity-building programs, leadership training, and intra-party reforms can further support women's advancement into decision-making roles at all levels of governance. The political system must actively promote women's inclusion in ministerial roles to ensure their meaningful participation in decision-making at the highest levels of governance.

D. Education and Skills Development

Education remains one of the most powerful enablers of gender equality and long-term freedom. Policy efforts must go beyond primary enrollment to focus on retention at secondary and tertiary levels, where dropout rates for girls remain high. Addressing barriers such as safety, affordability, and cultural norms is essential to sustaining educational participation. At the same time, there is a growing need to align education with the demands of the modern economy through digital literacy, technical training, and vocational skills development. Investing in STEM education and emerging sectors can help position women as active participants in future economic transformation.

E. Digital Inclusion

As the digital economy expands, ensuring women's inclusion in digital spaces is critical to preventing new forms of inequality. Policies must prioritize affordable access to internet connectivity and digital devices, particularly in underserved and rural areas. At the same time, creating safe online environments is essential to encourage participation. This includes strengthening cybercrime laws, improving reporting mechanisms, and enhancing the capacity of institutions to address online harassment and abuse. Digital literacy programs tailored for women can further enable meaningful engagement with technology, from education and employment to entrepreneurship and civic participation.

F. Normative and Social Change

Perhaps the most complex dimension of gendered freedom lies in addressing deeply embedded social and cultural norms. Legal and policy reforms must be complemented by sustained efforts to shift societal attitudes through public awareness campaigns, media engagement, and education initiatives. Engaging community leaders, religious scholars, and local influencers is critical to fostering acceptance and ownership of gender equality at the grassroots level. Behavioral change communication strategies can help challenge stereotypes, promote positive role models, and create an enabling environment for women's participation across all spheres of life.

G. Towards an Integrated Framework

The pathway to gendered freedom in Pakistan is not linear; it requires integration across policy domains and sustained political commitment. Institutional reforms must be supported by economic opportunities, social acceptance, and technological inclusion. Importantly, policies must be informed by data-driven insights and

continuous feedback mechanisms, ensuring that interventions are responsive to the evolving realities of women's lives.

Ultimately, gendered freedom is not only a question of equity but also of national development. Expanding women's participation in economic, political, and social spheres has the potential to unlock significant gains in productivity, governance, and societal well-being. The challenge, therefore, is not merely to design policies, but to translate intent into impact, ensuring that the promise of freedom is realized in practice for all women across Pakistan.

8.10 Freedom Through Inclusion

Gender is not a peripheral concern within the discourse on freedom; it is foundational to its very architecture. A society cannot credibly claim to be free if a significant proportion of its population, half, in the case of women, continues to face constrained access to rights, opportunities, and security. Freedom, in its truest sense, is indivisible. When it is unevenly distributed, it ceases to function as a collective national asset and instead becomes a selective privilege. In this context, gender equality is not merely a social objective but a structural prerequisite for a free and equitable society.

In Pakistan, this dynamic reflects an evolving landscape. Over the years, the country has developed a strong constitutional and legal framework that affirms gender equality and supports the protection of women's rights. Policy initiatives, legislative reforms, and institutional mechanisms demonstrate a clear and sustained commitment toward greater inclusion.

At the same time, translating these principles into uniformly experienced outcomes remains an ongoing process. Factors such as economic participation, access to education, and mobility continue to vary across regions and communities, often shaped by local contexts and social norms. As these areas receive increasing policy attention, there is a gradual alignment between legal commitments and lived realities, contributing to a more inclusive and enabling environment over time.

The key priority, therefore, lies in further strengthening the implementation of existing policies to ensure their full and consistent impact. This involves enhancing institutional responsiveness, reinforcing enforcement mechanisms, and expanding inclusive access to opportunities across sectors.

At the same time, there is growing recognition that inclusion is inherently cross-cutting, spanning governance, the economy, education, technology, and social systems. Advancing progress through a coordinated and integrated approach can help ensure that gains in one area are supported and sustained across others, contributing to more balanced and inclusive development outcomes.

Importantly, inclusion must be understood not only in terms of access but also in terms of agency and influence. Ensuring that women are present in institutions, markets, and public spaces is necessary but not sufficient. True freedom requires that women are able to participate meaningfully, shape decisions, and exercise autonomy over their lives. This shift from representation to empowerment is central to redefining the trajectory of gender equality in Pakistan.

Pakistan stands at a critical juncture where attitudinal change is beginning to outpace institutional reform. Younger generations, increased access to education, and the expansion of digital platforms are gradually reshaping perceptions around gender roles and participation. This presents a unique window of opportunity. If supported by targeted policy interventions and institutional strengthening, these shifts can accelerate progress toward a more inclusive and equitable society. However, if left unaddressed, the disconnect between rising expectations and institutional limitations may deepen existing inequalities.

Ultimately, the future of freedom in Pakistan depends on the ability to embed inclusion at the core of its development trajectory. This means moving beyond viewing gender as a standalone issue and instead recognizing it as a cross-cutting dimension that influences economic growth, governance effectiveness, social cohesion, and national resilience. A more inclusive Pakistan is not only a more just society, it is also a more stable, prosperous, and forward-looking one.

Freedom through inclusion, therefore, is both a moral imperative and a strategic necessity. It calls for a reorientation of systems, policies, and societal attitudes to ensure that equality is not confined to principle but realized in practice. Only then can freedom be experienced not as an abstract ideal, but as a lived reality for all.



Chapter 9:

Regional and Comparative Analysis

A meaningful assessment of freedom within Pakistan requires situating its performance within a broader regional and global context. Freedom is not experienced in isolation; it is shaped by geopolitical dynamics, governance models, economic structures, and socio-cultural norms that often transcend national boundaries. This chapter provides a comparative analysis of Pakistan's standing in relation to its regional peers in South Asia, selected Muslim-majority countries, and global benchmarks, offering both perspective and direction for reform.

9.1 South Asia: Shared Histories, Divergent Trajectories

South Asia presents a complex landscape of democratic aspirations, institutional fragility, and evolving governance systems. Countries in the region share colonial legacies, socio-economic inequalities, and demographic pressures, yet their trajectories in political, civil, and economic freedoms differ significantly.

India, often positioned as the world's largest democracy, has historically outperformed regional peers in electoral participation and institutional continuity. However, recent trends point toward increasing concerns over civil liberties, media independence, and minority rights. Bangladesh, on the other hand, has demonstrated strong economic growth and improvements in certain social indicators, but faces persistent criticism over political centralization and constraints on dissent.

Sri Lanka's experience reflects the volatility of governance, where economic crises have directly translated into public unrest and institutional strain. Nepal has made notable progress in constitutional restructuring and inclusion following its transition to a federal democratic republic, although governance capacity remains uneven.

In the regional context, Pakistan holds a balanced and evolving position. It demonstrates competitive electoral processes and a dynamic media landscape, alongside continued efforts to strengthen institutional continuity, local governance, and coordination across state structures. Compared to many of its peers, Pakistan benefits from well-established legal and institutional frameworks, with ongoing focus on enhancing their consistency and effectiveness in implementation.

9.2 Muslim-Majority Countries: Governance Models and Freedom Trade-offs

A comparison with Muslim-majority countries reveals a wide spectrum of governance models, ranging from centralized monarchies to hybrid democracies and transitional states. These models illustrate the trade-offs between stability, economic growth, and individual freedoms.

Countries such as the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia have achieved rapid economic transformation and high standards of living, supported by strong centralized governance. However, these gains are often accompanied by limitations on political participation and civil liberties. In contrast, countries like Indonesia and Malaysia demonstrate more pluralistic political systems, with varying degrees of success in balancing democratic governance with economic development.

Turkey presents a model where strong institutional centralization and executive coordination have been emphasized to maintain political stability, national cohesion, and governance continuity, particularly during periods of regional and domestic challenges. At the same time, discussions among international observers and policy analysts continue regarding the evolving balance between state authority, media regulation, and institutional independence within the country's democratic framework.

Similarly, Egypt reflects a governance approach characterized by a strong centralized state structure aimed at ensuring security, administrative stability, and institutional control in a complex regional environment. While this model has contributed to continuity in governance and state authority, it has also generated ongoing international discourse concerning political participation, civic space, and institutional openness.

Pakistan occupies a distinct position within this broader regional landscape. The country continues to operate under a constitutional democratic framework characterized by regular elections, a federal governance structure, an active judiciary, a vibrant media environment, a highly dynamic civil society, and strong public and political engagement. Pakistan's governance model reflects the complexity of managing a diverse federation with multiple political, ethnic, linguistic, and regional dynamics, requiring continuous coordination across federal and provincial institutions.

Unlike more centralized governance systems, Pakistan's constitutional structure emphasizes participatory governance, provincial autonomy, and democratic representation across different tiers of government. While this diversity can create administrative and institutional complexities, it also reflects the country's pluralistic political landscape and evolving democratic character. Ongoing institutional reforms, digital governance initiatives, and efforts to strengthen coordination between federal and provincial stakeholders continue to support the gradual development of a more responsive, inclusive, and adaptive governance framework.

9.3 Economic Freedom: Regional Competitiveness and Structural Constraints

Economic freedom is a key driver of overall progress, shaping opportunities for employment, entrepreneurship, and social mobility. Within South Asia, Pakistan's economic landscape reflects a dynamic and evolving environment, with ongoing efforts to formalize the economy, broaden the tax base, streamline regulatory processes, and expand financial inclusion. These initiatives are gradually strengthening the foundation for more inclusive and sustainable economic growth.

India's scale and digital transformation initiatives have enhanced its economic dynamism, particularly in technology and services. Bangladesh has leveraged its manufacturing sector, especially textiles, to achieve export-led growth. Sri Lanka, despite recent setbacks, historically maintained higher human development indicators.

Pakistan's economic trajectory reflects a transition toward greater policy coherence and improved implementation. Ongoing reforms in areas such as digital payments, taxation, and business facilitation are contributing to a more enabling environment, with their impact gradually expanding across sectors. Financial inclusion has seen notable progress, particularly through the growth of mobile banking, with continued efforts focused on enhancing active usage and broadening access across different segments of the population.

In a global context, Pakistan is steadily advancing its position among emerging markets, with increasing attention to improving the ease of doing business, strengthening the investment climate, and fostering innovation. At the same time, the country's strategic geographic location, young and dynamic population, and expanding digital infrastructure offer strong foundations for future growth, presenting significant opportunities for sustained economic development.

9.4 Civil Liberties and Media Freedom: Comparative Constraints

Civil liberties across the region reflect an evolving global landscape, where governments are increasingly working to balance openness with regulatory responsibilities in areas such as media, digital platforms, and civil society engagement. In South Asia, including countries like India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, policy frameworks continue to adapt in response to emerging challenges related to information management, digital governance, and public discourse.

Within this context, Pakistan's media environment remains notably diverse, supported by a wide range of private channels, digital platforms, and active public engagement. This plurality contributes to a vibrant exchange of ideas, while also requiring careful regulatory coordination to manage competing priorities related to governance, public order, and security considerations.

In comparison to several regions, including parts of the West Asia, Pakistan provides considerable space for public dialogue and civil society participation. At the same time, ongoing efforts are focused on further strengthening frameworks related to freedom of expression, the protection of journalists, and digital governance, aligning these areas with evolving international practices and standards.

9.5 Gender Freedom: Regional Parallels and Divergences

Gender-based freedom remains one of the most significant challenges across both South Asia and the Muslim world. While legal frameworks have improved, societal norms and economic barriers continue to limit women's participation.

Bangladesh has made strides in female labor force participation, particularly in the garment sector, while India has seen mixed progress with persistent gender gaps in employment and leadership. Pakistan continues to lag behind in key indicators such as workforce participation, political representation beyond reserved seats, and access to economic resources.

Table 9.5: Global Gender Gap Index – Pakistan & Regional Comparison

Country	Overall Rank	Score	Economic Participation Rank	Educational Attainment Rank	Health & Survival Rank	Political Empowerment Rank
Pakistan	148 / 148	0.567	145	~135	~132	~95
India	129 / 148	~0.643	~142	~110	~142	~65
Bangladesh	59 / 148	~0.726	~139	~120	~110	~7
Sri Lanka	122 / 148	~0.668	~135	~90	~80	~110
Nepal	107 / 148	~0.690	~125	~115	~100	~60
Iran	143 / 148	~0.580	~144	~100	~120	~143

Based on World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap Report 2025 – latest available estimates and relative positions

Compared to Gulf countries, Pakistan offers greater political participation opportunities for women, including parliamentary representation. However, economic empowerment and social mobility remain limited due to structural and cultural constraints.

The regional comparison highlights a common pattern: legal equality does not automatically translate into lived equality. Pakistan's challenge is to bridge this gap through targeted policy interventions and societal transformation.

9.6 Governance and Institutional Effectiveness: A Comparative Lens

Institutional effectiveness is a defining factor in translating freedom from principle into practice. Countries with strong bureaucratic systems, clear accountability mechanisms, and efficient service delivery tend to perform better across freedom indicators.

Table 9.6: Regional Governance and Institutional Effectiveness

Country	Governance Structure	Institutional Strength	Local Government System	Service Delivery Efficiency	Key Challenges	Overall Assessment
Pakistan	Federal parliamentary system	Moderately strong	Weak and inconsistent implementation (Article 140A gaps)	Uneven across provinces	Institutional overlap, weak local governance	Structurally sound but operationally inconsistent
India	Federal democratic system	Strong institutional continuity	Functioning multi-tier local governments (Panchayati Raj)	Relatively strong, especially in urban areas	Bureaucratic complexity, regional disparities	Strong institutional depth with uneven outcomes
Bangladesh	Centralized parliamentary system	Moderately strong but politically influenced	Limited autonomy at local level	Improving in social sectors	Political centralization, limited accountability	Efficient in delivery but constrained politically
Sri Lanka	Semi-presidential system	Historically strong institutions	Functioning local bodies	Moderate, impacted by economic crisis	Fiscal instability, governance shocks	Strong legacy institutions under stress
Nepal	Federal democratic republic	Developing institutional capacity	Strengthening local governments post-federalization	Improving gradually	Capacity constraints, political instability	Promising but still evolving
Indonesia	Decentralized democratic system	Strong and improving	Robust decentralized governance	Strong in many regions	Corruption at local levels, regional inequality	Effective decentralization model
Malaysia	Federal constitutional monarchy	Strong bureaucratic system	Functional but centrally influenced	High efficiency	Political transitions, central dominance	High governance efficiency with political flux
Turkey	Presidential system	Strong but centralized	Limited local autonomy	High efficiency in execution	Democratic backsliding, reduced institutional independence	Efficient but highly centralized
United Arab Emirates	Federal monarchy	Very strong centralized governance	Limited participatory governance	Very high efficiency	Limited political freedoms	Highly efficient, low participatory governance
Saudi Arabia	Absolute monarchy	Strong centralized institutions	Minimal local governance role	High efficiency in service delivery	Limited civic participation	High efficiency, low institutional pluralism

Singapore and Malaysia, though not direct regional peers, offer examples of governance efficiency and policy consistency. Within South Asia, Nepal and Sri Lanka have made efforts toward decentralization, while India's federal structure provides a mix of autonomy and central oversight.

Pakistan's governance framework reflects a multi-layered structure designed to accommodate diverse administrative and institutional needs. This complexity, while enabling broad representation, also presents opportunities for further strengthening coordination across different tiers of government. Efforts to enhance clarity in roles, streamline mandates, and improve institutional alignment are increasingly being prioritized to support more efficient governance outcomes.

At the local level, continued attention is being directed toward strengthening governance systems in line with constitutional provisions, with a focus on enhancing grassroots participation, service delivery, and accountability. These ongoing reforms aim to reinforce inclusive governance and ensure that decision-making processes are more responsive to local needs.

9.7 Pakistan in Global Indices: Perception vs Reality

Global indices such as those measuring freedom, competitiveness, gender parity, and corruption often shape international perceptions of Pakistan. While these indices provide valuable benchmarks, they are influenced by data availability, perception surveys, and methodological limitations.

Pakistan's rankings typically reflect challenges in governance, gender equality, and institutional trust. However, they often underrepresent ongoing reforms, digital transformation efforts, and improvements in service delivery. This gap between perception and reality underscores the importance of robust data systems, transparent reporting, and strategic communication.

Table 9.7: Freedom Index Rankings (South Asia & Regional Context)

Country	Global Status	Score (out of 100)	Category
Pakistan	Partly Free	37 / 100	Evolving / Transitional
India	Partly Free	66 / 100	Electoral Democracy (declining freedoms)
Bangladesh	Not Free	40 / 100	Authoritarian-leaning
Sri Lanka	Partly Free	55 / 100	Recovering democracy
Nepal	Partly Free	60 / 100	Emerging federal democracy
Afghanistan	Not Free	8 / 100	Closed authoritarian system

Comparatively, countries that invest in data governance and international engagement tend to perform better in these indices, not only due to actual improvements but also due to better representation of their progress.

9.8 Key Insights from Comparative Analysis

The comparative analysis of Pakistan within its regional and global context reveals a set of structural realities that go beyond rankings and scores. These insights provide a deeper understanding of how freedom is shaped, not only by laws and institutions, but by execution, perception, and societal dynamics.

A. Framework vs Implementation Gap

Pakistan's constitutional and legal architecture provides a robust foundation for freedom. The 1973 Constitution guarantees fundamental rights, including freedom of speech, association, religion, and due process. Additionally, a wide range of legislative instruments, covering areas such as right to information, gender protection laws, and digital governance, demonstrate a formal commitment to democratic values.

A key area of focus remains the consistency of implementation across regions, institutions, and administrative cycles. While a comprehensive set of laws and policies is in place, their application can vary, reflecting differences in capacity, coordination, and local contexts. Factors such as judicial timelines, institutional resources, regulatory coordination, and administrative processes can influence the pace and effectiveness of outcomes. For instance, although legal protections in areas such as gender-based violence are well established, continued efforts are being made to enhance access to justice through improved service delivery, strengthened policing practices, and more efficient procedures.

This reflects an evolving landscape where strong legal foundations are increasingly being complemented by efforts to enhance operational effectiveness. Ongoing reforms are therefore placing greater emphasis on institutional performance, accountability, and service delivery, with the aim of ensuring that policy intent is more consistently translated into tangible outcomes.

B. Regional Convergence of Challenges

Pakistan's freedom-related challenges are not unique; they reflect broader regional patterns across South Asia. Countries such as India, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka exhibit similar tensions between democratic frameworks and governance realities.

Across the region, there is a visible convergence of constraints:

» Increasing and evolving regulations of media and digital platforms

» Shrinking civic space and pressures on civil society organizations

» Persistent gender inequality despite legislative progress

» Centralization of political power and weakening of local governance

This convergence suggests that these issues are not merely country-specific but are rooted in shared

structural factors, including political economy dynamics, institutional maturity, and socio-cultural norms.

For Pakistan, this regional alignment presents both a caution and an opportunity. While it highlights systemic risks, it also opens pathways for regional learning, policy exchange, and collaborative reforms, particularly in areas such as digital governance, judicial reforms, and gender inclusion strategies.

C. Diversity as Both Strength and Complexity

Pakistan's diversity, across provinces, ethnicities, languages, and socio-economic contexts, is one of its greatest assets. It enables a rich societal fabric and offers the potential for inclusive growth and pluralistic governance. However, this same diversity introduces significant complexity in policy design and implementation.

The federal structure requires decentralized governance mechanisms that can respond to localized needs. Yet, the absence of consistent and empowered local governments, despite constitutional provisions such as Article 140A, has created a governance vacuum at the grassroots level. This limits citizen participation, reduces accountability, and weakens service delivery.

Moreover, disparities between urban and rural areas, as well as between provinces, mean that freedom is experienced unevenly. Access to education, justice, digital connectivity, and economic opportunities varies significantly, creating multiple "realities of freedom" within the same country.

To harness diversity as a strength, Pakistan must move toward context-sensitive governance, where policies are adaptable, data-driven, and locally responsive rather than uniformly imposed.

D. Perception Matters: The Power of Narrative and Data

In the global ecosystem of rankings and indices, perception plays a critical role. Institutions such as Freedom House and the World Economic Forum rely not only on quantitative indicators but also on perception-based inputs, expert assessments, and data availability.

Pakistan often faces a perception-reality gap, where ongoing reforms, digital transformation efforts, and institutional improvements are underrepresented in global narratives. This is partly due to:

» Weak data standardization and reporting mechanisms

» Limited international dissemination of reforms and policy outcomes

» Inconsistent engagement with global benchmarking institutions

As a result, Pakistan's global rankings may reflect structural challenges but may not fully capture reform momentum or contextual complexities.

This underscores a critical policy insight: freedom must not only be delivered, it must also be measured, documented, and communicated effectively. Strengthening national data systems, aligning with international reporting standards, and proactively shaping narratives are essential components of improving both perception and performance.

E. Synthesis: From Insight to Action

Taken together, these insights point toward a central conclusion: Pakistan's challenge is not one of absence, but of alignment. The country has the frameworks, the diversity, and the institutional base required to advance freedom. What is needed is coherence between law and practice, national policy and local delivery, and domestic progress and global perception.

Addressing these gaps requires a systemic approach, one that integrates governance reform, institutional strengthening, data transparency, and strategic communication into a unified national effort toward expanding freedom in both principle and practice.

9.9 Learning from Comparisons, Leading through Reform

Comparative analysis is not merely an exercise in ranking; it is a tool for reflection and strategic planning. Pakistan's position within its region and among global peers highlights both its challenges and its potential. The country stands at a point where incremental reforms must evolve into systemic transformation.

Freedom, in this context, is not a static achievement but a dynamic process, one that requires continuous alignment between policy, practice, and public trust. By learning from regional experiences and adapting global best practices to its unique context, Pakistan can move toward a more inclusive, accountable, and resilient framework of freedom.

9.10 Urban vs Rural Freedom Indicators

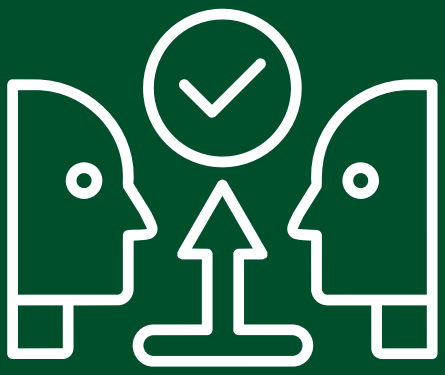
Freedom in Pakistan is experienced unevenly, with a pronounced divide between urban and rural areas shaped by disparities in infrastructure, governance, and socio-economic conditions. Major cities such as Islamabad, Karachi, and Lahore offer relatively greater access to economic opportunities, digital connectivity, public services, and civic engagement. In contrast, rural regions, particularly in Balochistan, interior Sindh, and southern Punjab, face structural constraints including limited institutional presence, weaker service delivery, and reliance on traditional power structures, which restrict independent political and social agency.

Economic opportunities tend to be more diverse in urban areas, supported by broader employment options and greater access to financial services, while rural economies continue to play a vital role through agriculture and informal sectors. As development efforts expand, increasing attention is being directed toward enhancing economic mobility and inclusion in rural areas, particularly for women.

Social dynamics also vary across regions. Urban centers often benefit from greater exposure and evolving social practices, while rural communities reflect strong local traditions and social structures. Ongoing initiatives in education, awareness, and community engagement are contributing to a gradual broadening of opportunities across these contexts.

The digital landscape similarly reflects these variations, with urban populations more integrated into digital ecosystems, while rural areas are progressively being connected through infrastructure development and digital literacy programs. Access to justice and public services has traditionally been more accessible in urban settings; however, continued investments in institutional capacity, decentralization, and service delivery are aimed at improving reach and effectiveness in rural and remote areas, fostering more balanced and inclusive development nationwide.

Overall, Pakistan reflects dual realities of freedom, where urban centers exhibit evolving, though imperfect, ecosystems of opportunity, while rural areas continue to experience constrained access and agency. Bridging this divide requires targeted, location-sensitive policies focused on strengthening local governance, expanding digital and economic inclusion, and improving service delivery to ensure that freedom is not determined by geography.



Chapter 10:

Public Perception and Trust

10.1 National Freedom Perception Survey Results

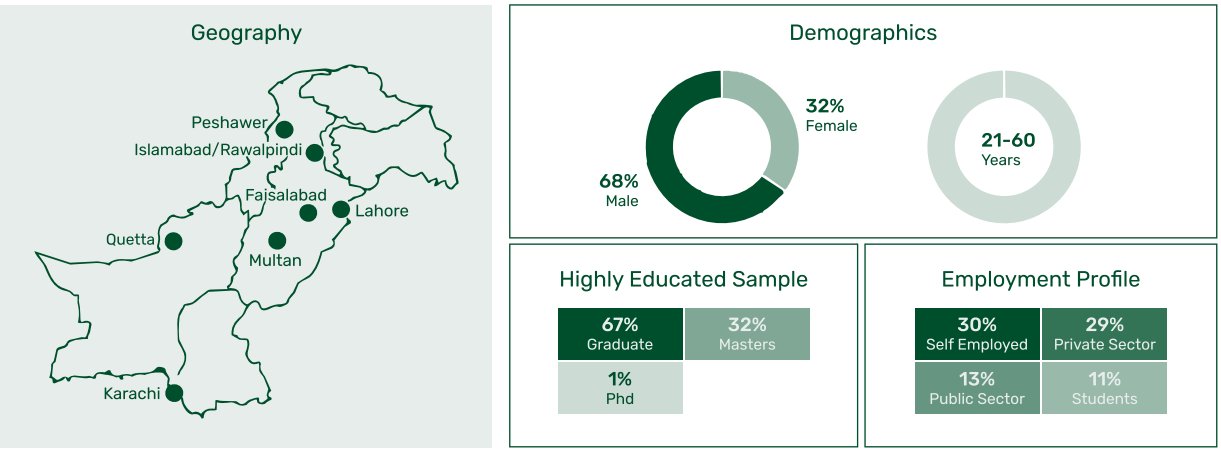
Public perception serves as one of the most powerful indicators of the health of a nation's freedom environment. While constitutional guarantees, institutional frameworks, and legal protections form the structural backbone of freedom, the lived experience of citizens determines whether those freedoms are meaningful in practice. Trust, confidence, and perception often reveal the gap between policy intent and public reality.

To capture this dimension, the Freedom Report introduces the National Freedom Perception Survey under the broader TRUST Survey framework. Designed as a nationwide quantitative and qualitative assessment, the survey seeks to understand how citizens perceive freedom across political, economic, social, digital, and institutional dimensions. The objective is not merely to measure satisfaction, but to assess whether individuals feel empowered, protected, heard, and included within the national governance system.

The total sample size comprises 2,000 respondents across six major cities: Karachi, Lahore, Quetta, Islamabad/Rawalpindi, Faisalabad, Multan, and Peshawar. The sample includes individuals aged 21 to 60 years. The gender distribution of the sample is 68 percent male and 35.5 percent female, reflecting participation patterns observed during fieldwork. It includes representation from urban and rural populations, different income groups, youth, women, professionals, entrepreneurs, labor communities, and marginalized populations. This diversity ensures that freedom is measured not only from the perspective of policy elites but from the everyday experiences of ordinary citizens.

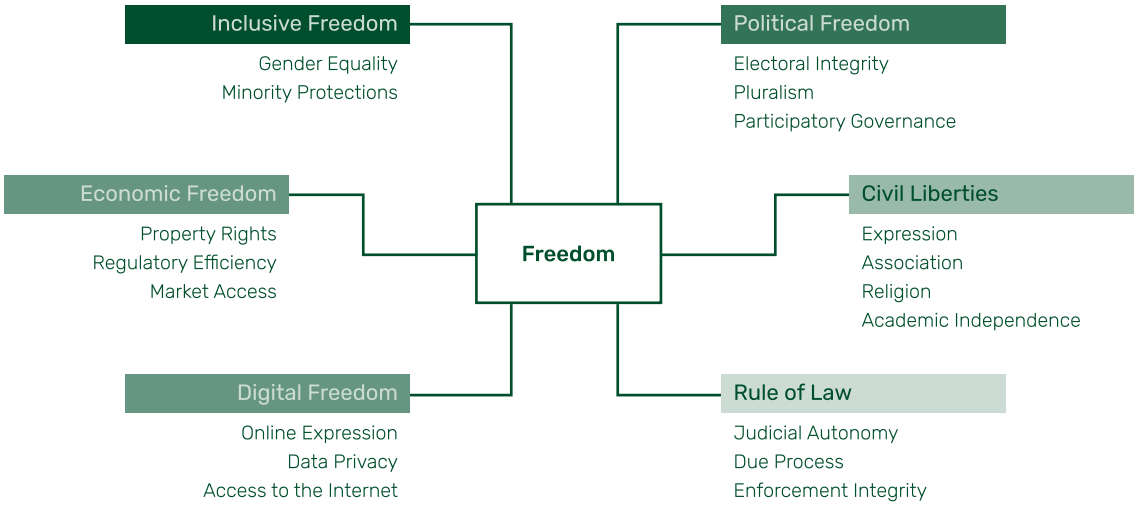
Anatomy of the Survey

Capturing the voices of an economically active, educated, and diverse urban population.
N=2,000 | Face-to-face interviews | Dec 21, 2025 – Mar 13, 2026 | ±2.2% Margin of Error.



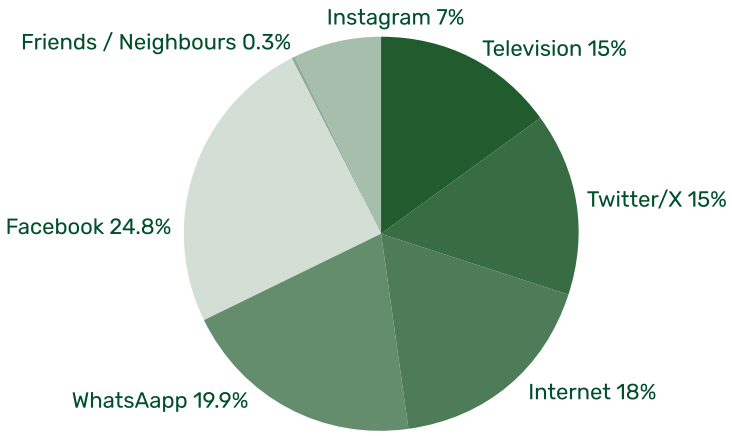
The respondent pool was highly educated, reflecting a strong representation of individuals with advanced academic backgrounds. A majority of respondents (67%) held a graduate degree, while 32% possessed Master's level qualifications (MA/MSc or equivalent). An additional 1% of respondents held doctoral qualifications (Ph.D. or equivalent). No respondents reported educational attainment below the graduate level, indicating that the survey sample primarily consisted of highly educated individuals with significant academic and professional exposure.

Women's Mobility Restrictions in Pakistan



The survey findings indicate that digital and social media platforms have become the primary sources through which respondents obtain information regarding government activities and public affairs. Facebook emerged as the leading source of information, cited by 24.8% of respondents, followed by WhatsApp at 19.9% and the broader internet at 18%. X Corp. (Twitter/X) and television each accounted for 15% of responses, reflecting the continued relevance of both social media and traditional broadcast platforms in shaping public awareness. Instagram was identified by 7% of respondents as their primary information source. In contrast, traditional print media, radio, community newspapers, local markets, and interpersonal networks such as relatives and neighbors played a minimal role in information dissemination among the surveyed group. Overall, the findings reflect the growing dominance of digital communication platforms in influencing public understanding of governance, policy developments, and state affairs in Pakistan.

Main Sources of Information About Government Activities



The employment profile of respondents reflected a diverse and economically active sample. A majority of respondents were either self-employed (30%) or employed in the private sector (29%), indicating strong representation from entrepreneurial and business-oriented segments of society. Respondents employed in the public sector accounted for 13% of the sample, while students represented 11%, reflecting participation from younger and academically engaged demographics. A smaller proportion of respondents identified as unemployed (5%) or retired (3%). Overall, the distribution suggests that the survey captured perspectives from a broad cross-section of economically engaged and professionally active individuals.

The study is based on quantitative research design using a structured questionnaire. Data were collected through face-to-face interviews to ensure broad inclusion and minimize response bias associated with remote data collection methods with the help of experienced enumerators.

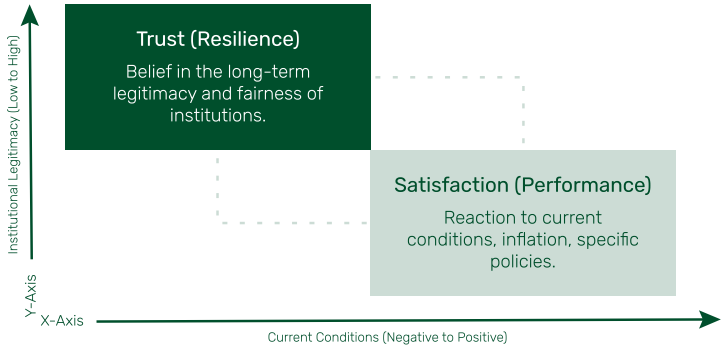
Fieldwork was conducted between December 21, 2025, and March 13, 2026. Interviews were conducted by trained enumerators following standardized field protocols, with regular supervision and quality control checks to ensure consistency and reliability.

At the aggregate level, the sample size yields an estimated margin of error of ±2.2 percent at a 95 percent confidence level, assuming a proportion of 50 percent.

Findings are representative of the selected urban population and should be interpreted within the scope of the sampling frame and survey design.

The survey framework focuses on five major dimensions: trust in institutions, rule of law and justice, economic opportunity and mobility, freedom of expression and civic participation, and equality and inclusion.

Women's Mobility Restrictions in Pakistan



Core Principle:
Citizens can be dissatisfied with current conditions (inflation, employment) while still retaining trust in the system.

Governance Insight:
Satisfaction reflects short-term performance; Trust reflects long-term resilience. Strong governance requires cultivating both through extreme predictability and fairness.

Respondents are asked not only about legal awareness but also about practical accessibility, whether institutions respond fairly, whether opportunities are equally distributed, and whether individuals feel safe exercising their rights.

Initial findings indicate that citizens tend to distinguish sharply between formal rights and practical freedoms. While awareness of constitutional protections remains relatively high, confidence in implementation remains significantly lower. Many respondents express belief that rights exist in principle, but are inconsistently applied depending on class, geography, political influence, or economic status.

Trust in justice delivery emerges as one of the most sensitive areas. Delays in judicial processes, unequal access to legal representation, and perceptions of selective accountability significantly shape public confidence. Citizens often view legal protection as available in theory but difficult to access in practice, particularly for lower-income and vulnerable groups.

Economic freedom also reflects a strong perception gap. Respondents associate freedom not only with civil liberties but with the ability to secure stable livelihoods, access financial systems, and improve social mobility. Rising inflation, employment uncertainty, and barriers to entrepreneurship influence perceptions of personal agency. For many citizens, economic vulnerability directly reduces their sense of freedom.

Perceptions of Freedom

A Report on Political, Social, and Economic Liberty

POLITICAL & CIVIC CONSTRAINTS	SOCIAL & ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES
73% Strongly Disagree on Electoral Fairness	77% Agree on Occupational Freedom
Systematic Repression of Public Voice Perceptions are heavily negative regarding	Robust Protection for Religious Freedom Unlike political rights, the majority perceives religious freedom as being well-protected and respected.
Political Party Restrictions Most respondents perceive significant limitations on the ability of political parties to operate freely.	Positive Business Environment Most respondents believe businesses can operate with minimal and undue government interference.
Media Freedom 53% Strongly Negative rated	

Women and youth respondents consistently highlight mobility, safety, and participation as central freedom concerns. Their responses suggest that freedom is increasingly understood through opportunity rather than solely through formal legal rights. Access to education, safe public spaces, digital participation, and merit-based advancement are viewed as core indicators of freedom.

Digital freedom presents a complex picture. While connectivity has expanded significantly, concerns around surveillance, online harassment, misinformation regulation, and internet disruptions shape perceptions of digital rights. Respondents acknowledge the importance of online spaces for participation and expression but remain uncertain about institutional protections in the digital sphere.

Regional comparisons also reveal important differences. Urban populations tend to prioritize governance efficiency and digital freedoms, while rural populations emphasize access to services, justice, and local government responsiveness. Provincial disparities further demonstrate that freedom is experienced differently depending on institutional capacity, service delivery, and administrative responsiveness.

An important feature of the survey is the distinction between trust and satisfaction. Citizens may express dissatisfaction with current conditions while still maintaining trust in the long-term legitimacy of institutions. This distinction is critical because trust reflects resilience, while satisfaction reflects performance. Strong governance requires both.

The findings also show that citizens value predictability and fairness more than promises. Public confidence increases where institutions are transparent, procedures are consistent, and decision-making appears impartial. This is particularly visible in perceptions of regulators, tax systems, police services, and local government administration.

For policymakers, these results provide more than public opinion, they offer governance intelligence. Perception data helps identify areas where reform communication is weak, where implementation gaps persist, and where institutional credibility requires urgent attention. It transforms freedom from an abstract principle into a measurable policy outcome.

The National Freedom Perception Survey therefore serves as a bridge between governance structures and citizen experience. It complements legislative and institutional analysis by revealing how freedom is understood on the ground. This strengthens the report's methodology by ensuring that freedom is not

assessed only through documentation, but through the confidence people place in the systems designed to protect them.

Ultimately, a nation's freedom cannot be judged solely by the rights it guarantees, but by the trust its citizens place in those guarantees. Public perception is not a secondary measure, it is the test of legitimacy itself.

In Pakistan's case, the results make one message clear: citizens do not simply seek rights; they seek reliability. They seek institutions that work, systems that treat them fairly, and a state that converts constitutional promises into everyday realities.

The Landscape of Liberty:

1. Introduction: Mapping the Three Pillars of Freedom

To analyze the structural health of a society, we must evaluate the three foundational sectors of liberty: Political, Social, and Economic. These pillars define the boundaries of citizen agency and the extent of institutional control. To provide a rigorous empirical baseline, this report utilizes a 1–7 scale to measure public sentiment:

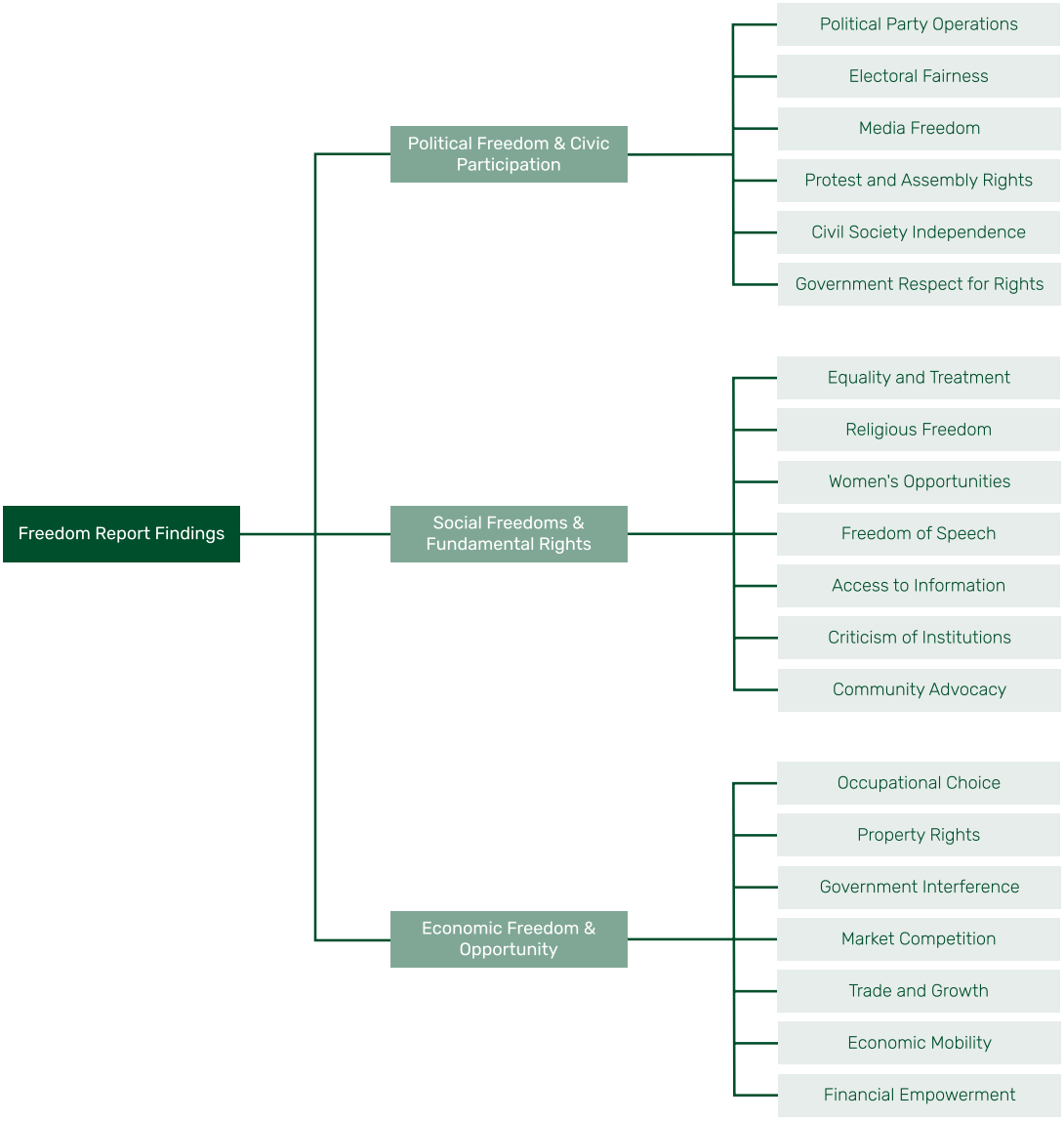


Figure : The Freedom Landscape of Pakistan, The Freedom Report 2026

- **Rating 1 (Strongly Disagree):** Indicates an intense perception of restriction or the total absence of a right.
- **Rating 4 (Neutral):** Represents a state of ambivalence or a lack of consensus.
- **Rating 7 (Strongly Agree):** Indicates a robust perception of autonomy and institutional protection.

While this framework establishes the theoretical bounds of liberty, the empirical data suggests a systemic

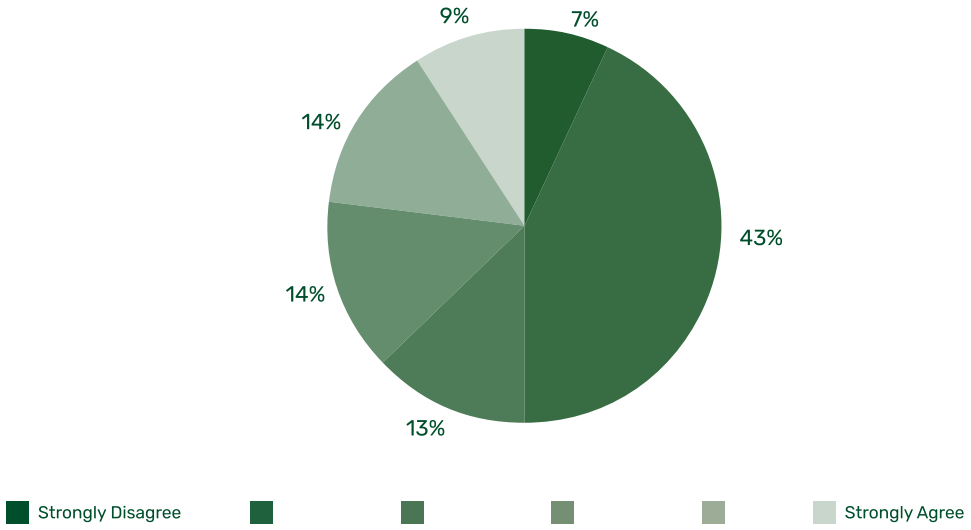
legitimacy deficit within the political arena.

10.1 Political Freedom & Civic Participation

Political parties operate within an evolving regulatory framework

Survey responses reflect a mixed but evolving perception regarding the operational environment for political parties. On a 1–7 scale (where 1 indicates strong disagreement and 7 indicates strong agreement), a segment of respondents expressed concerns, with 7% selecting 1, 43% rating 2, and 13% choosing 3. At the same time, a notable proportion—14% each selecting 5 and 6, and 9% selecting 7—indicated a more favorable view of the operating space.

Political parties operate within an evolving regulatory framework

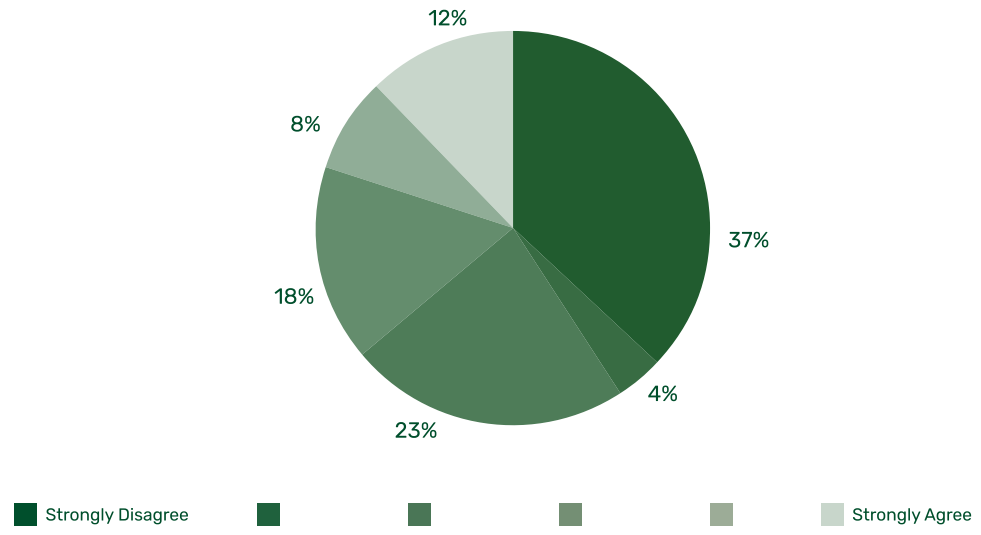


Overall, while perceptions remain varied, the distribution suggests that a significant portion of respondents continues to seek further strengthening of political facilitation measures. This presents an opportunity for ongoing institutional refinement, where regulatory frameworks can continue to balance political inclusivity with stability, ensuring that democratic processes are both orderly and progressively more enabling for all stakeholders.

Media operates within a regulated environment balancing freedom and responsibility

Overall, Pakistan's media landscape reflects a dynamic and evolving environment characterized by a diverse range of television channels, digital platforms, print media, and public discourse forums operating within an established legal and regulatory framework.

Protests and assembly rights are respected



Supported by institutions such as the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority and other relevant bodies, the media ecosystem continues to play an important role in public awareness, democratic engagement, and information dissemination. At the same time, regulatory efforts remain focused on balancing freedom of expression with professional responsibility, public interest, national cohesion, and legal considerations. Ongoing reforms, digital modernization initiatives, and increased stakeholder engagement continue to contribute toward strengthening transparency, regulatory effectiveness, and the development of a more responsible and sustainable media environment in Pakistan.

Protests and assembly rights are managed within a framework of public order and constitutional safeguards

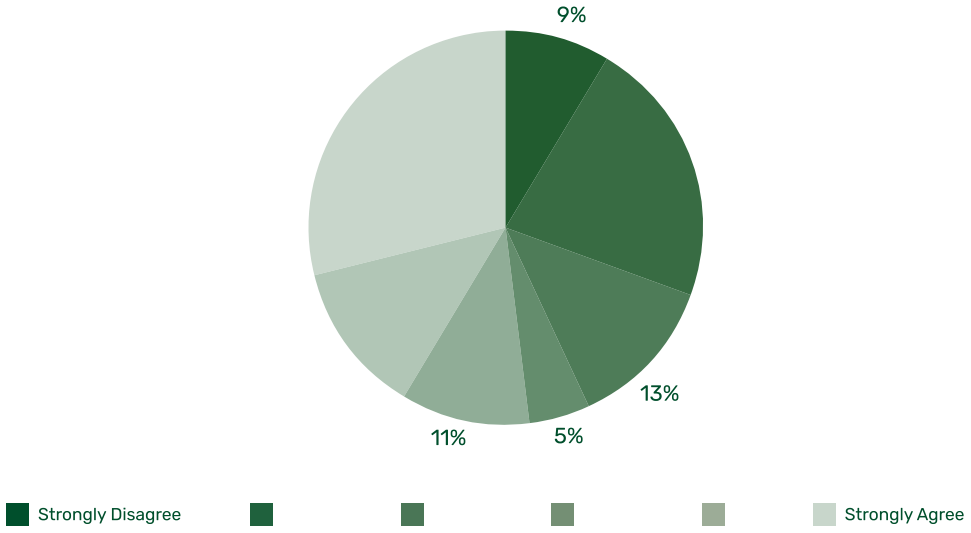
Survey responses reflect a range of public perceptions regarding the respect for protest and assembly rights. On a 1–7 scale (where 1 indicates strong disagreement and 7 indicates strong agreement), 64% of respondents (37% selecting 1, 4% selecting 2, and 23% selecting 3) expressed concerns about the extent to which these rights are exercised. A further 16% remained neutral, while 20% (8% selecting 5 and 12% selecting 6) indicated a more favorable view.

Overall, the findings highlight the dynamic balance between safeguarding constitutional rights and maintaining public order. Pakistan's legal framework recognizes the right to peaceful assembly, while also providing for regulatory measures to ensure safety, security, and continuity of public life. The results point toward opportunities for continued refinement of implementation practices, emphasizing proportionate, transparent, and facilitative approaches that strengthen both civic participation and institutional confidence.

Civil society organizations operate within a structured and evolving regulatory framework

Survey responses reflect a diverse range of public perceptions regarding the operational independence of civil society organizations. On a 1–7 scale (where 1 indicates strong disagreement and 7 indicates strong agreement), 61% of respondents (9% selecting 1, 39% selecting 2, and 13% selecting 3) expressed reservations about the extent of independence, while 5% remained neutral. At the same time, a notable 44% of respondents (11% selecting 5, 13% selecting 6, and 20% selecting 7) indicated a more positive assessment of the operating environment.

Civil society organisations operate independently



Overall, these findings highlight an active and evolving ecosystem in which civil society operates alongside regulatory and governance frameworks designed to ensure transparency, accountability, and alignment with national priorities. Pakistan continues to maintain space for civil society engagement across social, developmental, and humanitarian domains, with ongoing opportunities to further streamline processes, enhance coordination, and strengthen confidence in an enabling and well-regulated operating environment.

Government engagement with citizens' political rights continues to evolve within a constitutional framework

Overall, Pakistan's governance framework, anchored in constitutional guarantees and supported by judicial,

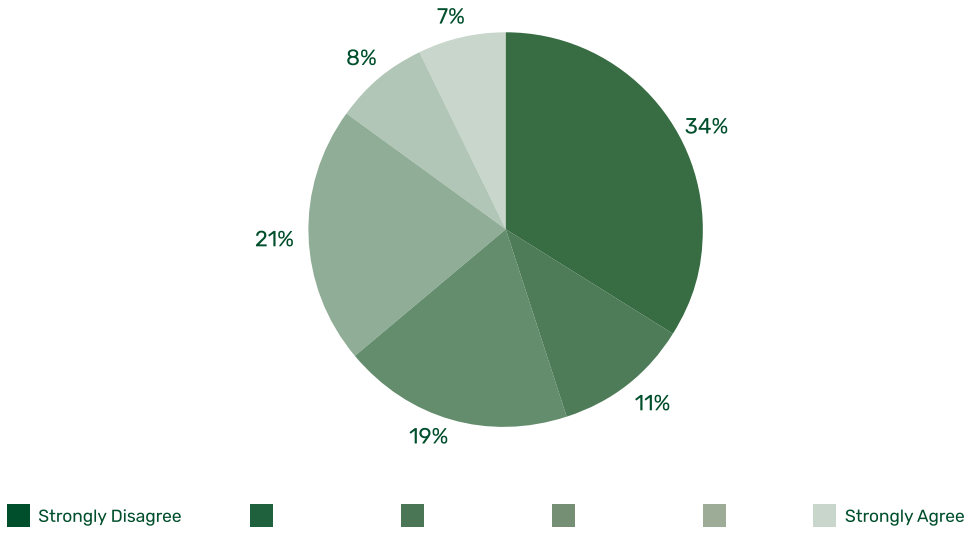
parliamentary, and regulatory institutions, provides a strong foundation for the protection of political rights and democratic participation. The country continues to uphold regular electoral processes, political representation, and citizen engagement within a constitutional and federal democratic structure. Ongoing institutional reforms, administrative improvements, and efforts to enhance transparency and public outreach continue to strengthen governance effectiveness and reinforce public confidence in the political and democratic process.

10.2 Social Freedoms & Fundamental Rights

Equality of citizens is upheld within a constitutional and institutional framework

Survey responses reflect a balanced and evolving perception regarding equal treatment of citizens irrespective of gender, ethnicity, or religion. On a 1–7 scale (where 1 indicates strong disagreement and 7 indicates strong agreement), 45% of respondents (34% selecting 2 and 11% selecting 3) expressed some reservations, while 19% remained neutral. At the same time, a combined 36% (21% selecting 5, 8% selecting 6, and 7% selecting 7) indicated a positive assessment of equality in practice.

All citizens aare treated equally regardless of gender, ethnicity, or religion



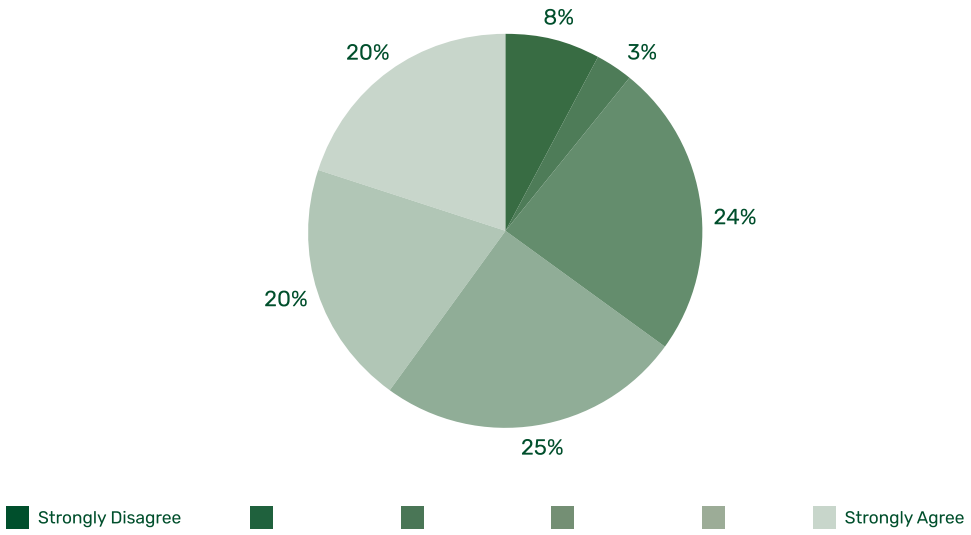
Overall, the distribution suggests a moderately favorable outlook, while also highlighting areas for continued progress. Pakistan's constitutional framework provides clear guarantees of equality and non-discrimination, supported by a range of institutional and policy measures aimed at inclusion and protection of minority and vulnerable groups. The findings point toward ongoing efforts to further strengthen implementation, awareness, and access, ensuring that principles of equality are consistently reflected in lived experiences across society.

Freedom of religion is upheld within a strong constitutional and institutional framework

Survey responses reflect a largely positive and balanced perception regarding the protection of religious freedom in Pakistan. On a 1–7 scale (where 1 indicates strong disagreement and 7 indicates strong agreement), only 11% of respondents (8% selecting 2 and 3% selecting 3) expressed reservations, while 24% remained neutral. A clear majority—65% of respondents (25% selecting 5, 20% selecting 6, and 20% selecting 7)—indicated a favorable assessment of religious freedom protections.

Overall, the distribution points toward a broadly encouraging outlook. Pakistan's constitutional provisions and institutional mechanisms provide a robust foundation for safeguarding freedom of religion, supported by state engagement in facilitating religious practices and protecting minority rights. The findings highlight continued progress while also underscoring the importance of sustained efforts to further strengthen inclusivity, awareness, and implementation across all segments of society. Overall, the distribution points toward a broadly encouraging outlook. Pakistan's constitutional provisions and institutional mechanisms provide a robust foundation for safeguarding freedom of religion, supported by state engagement in facilitating religious practices and protecting minority rights. The findings highlight continued progress while also underscoring the importance of sustained efforts to further strengthen inclusivity, awareness, and implementation across all segments of society.

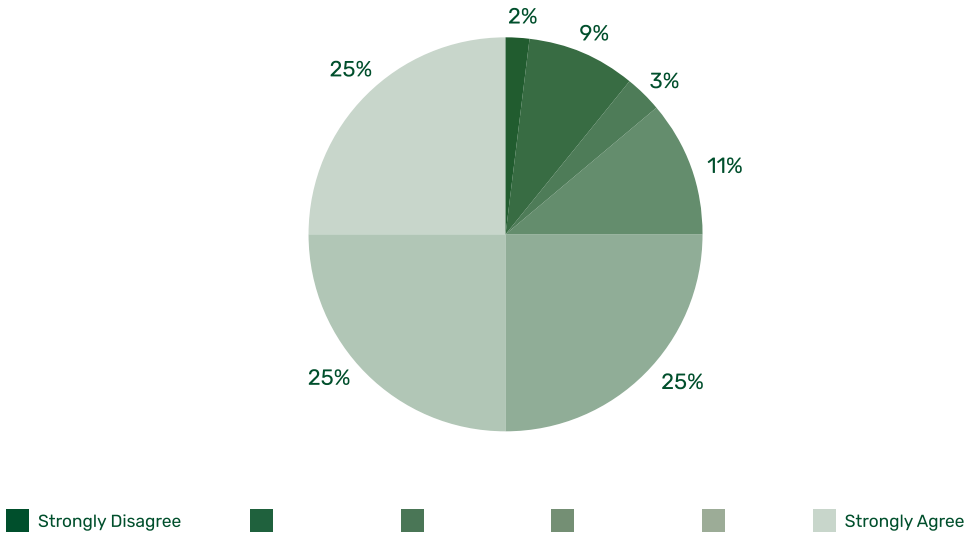
Freedom of religion is protected in Pakistan



Women's opportunities are advancing within a framework of inclusion and empowerment

Survey responses reflect a moderately positive and evolving perception regarding equal opportunities for women in society. On a 1–7 scale (where 1 indicates strong disagreement and 7 indicates strong agreement), only 14% of respondents (2% selecting 1, 9% selecting 2, and 3% selecting 3) expressed reservations, while 11% remained neutral. A clear majority—approximately 75%—indicated a favorable view, with responses concentrated at the higher end of the scale (including strong representation across ratings 5 and 6).

Women havve equal opportunities in society



Overall, the distribution points toward a broadly encouraging outlook, while acknowledging some variation in perceptions. Pakistan has undertaken a range of policy, legal, and institutional measures to promote gender inclusion, enhance access to education and employment, and strengthen protections for women. The findings highlight continued progress, alongside opportunities to further expand access, awareness, and implementation to ensure that women's empowerment is consistently reflected across all sectors of society.

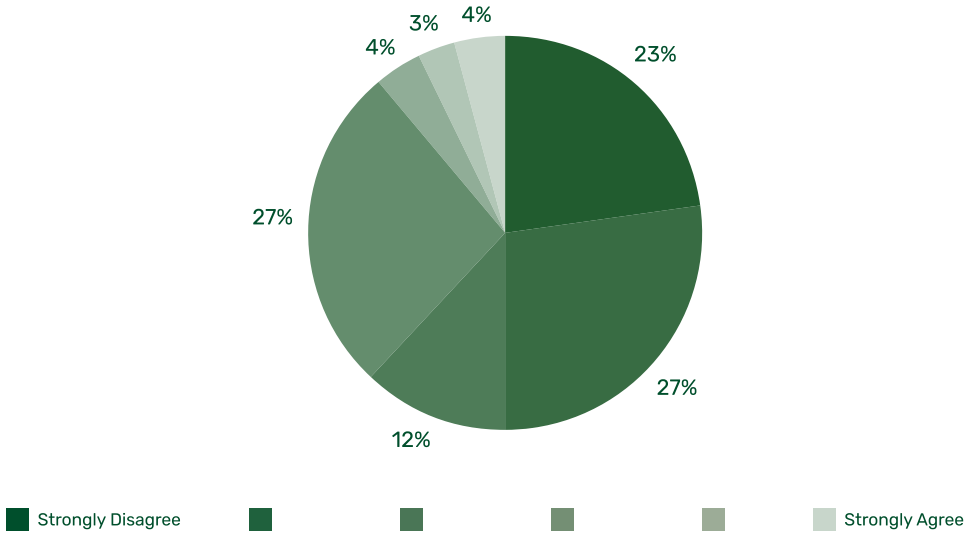
Freedom of speech is upheld within a balanced regulatory and constitutional framework

Survey responses reflect a diverse range of public perceptions regarding the respect for freedom of speech. On a 1–7 scale (where 1 indicates strong disagreement and 7 indicates strong agreement), 62% of respondents (23% selecting 1, 27% selecting 2, and 12% selecting 3) expressed concerns, while a significant 27% remained neutral. A smaller segment—11% (4% selecting 5, 3% selecting 6, and 4% selecting 7)—indicated a more positive assessment.

Overall, the findings highlight an active and evolving discourse around freedom of expression in Pakistan. The country's constitutional guarantees, supported by judicial oversight and regulatory institutions, provide

a strong foundation for protecting speech while balancing considerations of public order, national interest, and responsible communication. The results point toward opportunities for continued refinement in implementation, enhanced clarity in regulatory practices, and sustained engagement to further strengthen public confidence in a vibrant and responsible expression landscape.

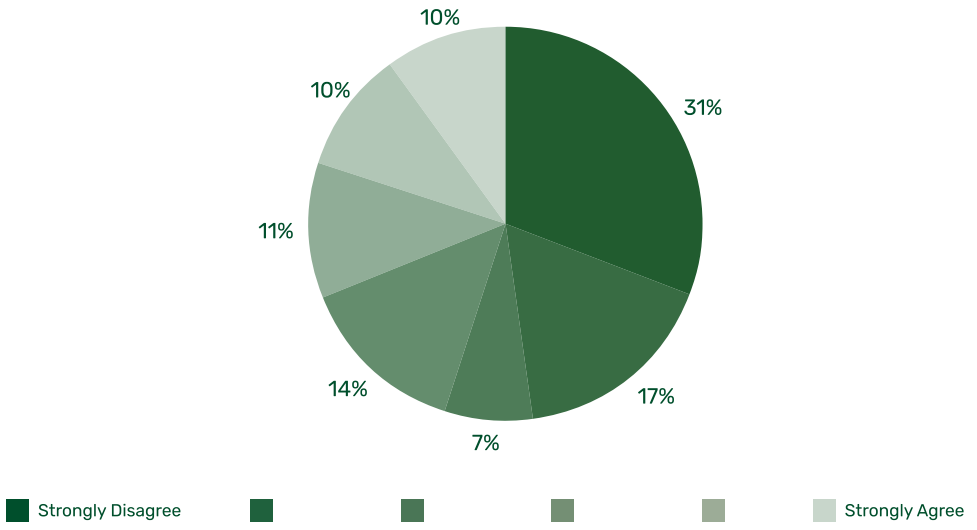
Freedom of speech is respected



Access to information is supported within a diverse and evolving media ecosystem

Survey responses reflect a range of public perceptions regarding citizens' access to unbiased information. On a 1–7 scale (where 1 indicates strong disagreement and 7 indicates strong agreement), 55% of respondents (31% selecting 1, 17% selecting 2, and 7% selecting 3) expressed reservations, while 14% remained neutral. At the same time, a notable 31% (11% selecting 5, 10% selecting 6, and 10% selecting 7) indicated a more positive assessment.

Citizens can access unbiased information



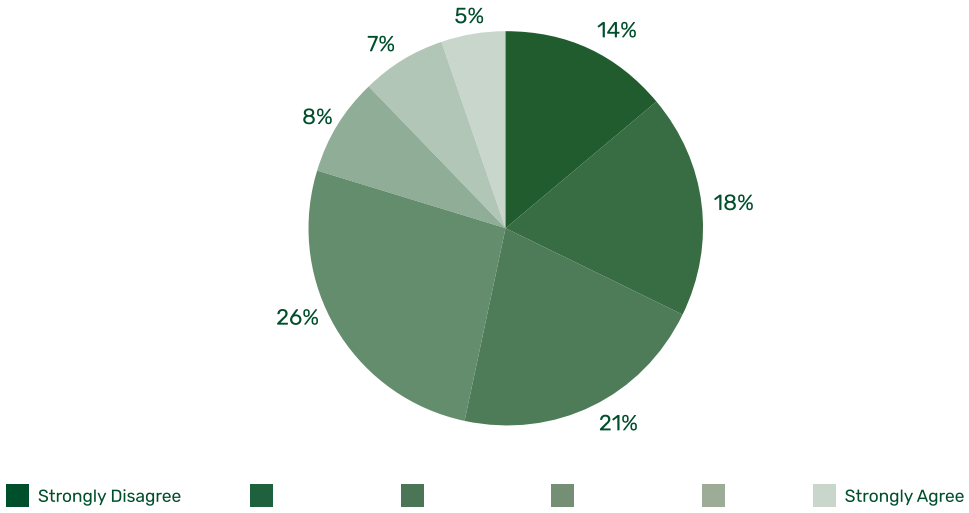
Overall, the findings highlight an active information landscape characterized by a multiplicity of media platforms and viewpoints. Pakistan's regulatory and institutional frameworks aim to support the availability of information while ensuring standards of accuracy, responsibility, and public interest. The results point toward opportunities for further strengthening media literacy, transparency, and content diversity, enhancing public confidence in access to balanced and reliable information.

Communities engage and organize within an enabling and evolving civic framework

Survey responses reflect a diverse range of public perceptions regarding the ability of communities to organize and advocate. On a 1–7 scale (where 1 indicates strong disagreement and 7 indicates strong agreement), 53%

of respondents (14% selecting 1, 18% selecting 2, and 21% selecting 3) expressed some reservations, while a significant 26% remained neutral. At the same time, 21% of respondents (8% selecting 5, 7% selecting 6, and 6% selecting 7) indicated a more positive assessment.

Communities have the freedom to organise and advocate



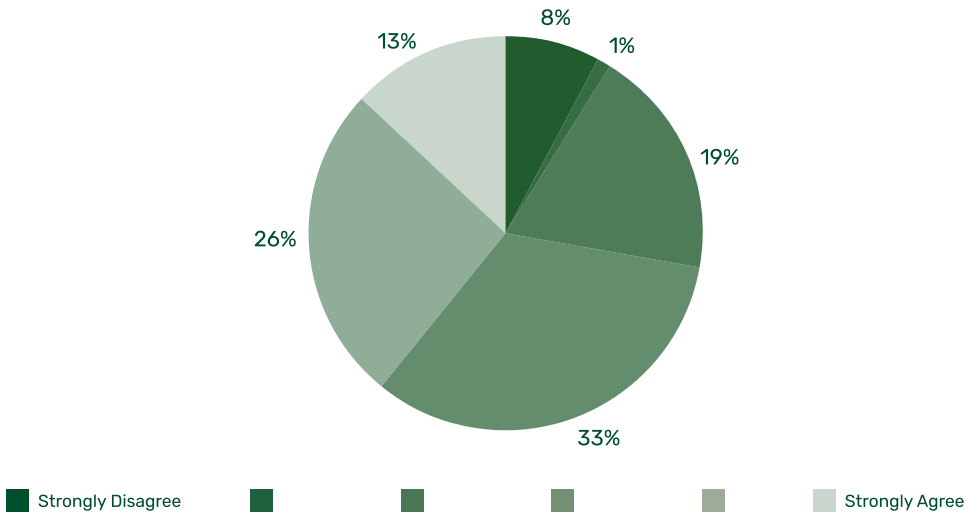
Overall, the findings highlight an active civic landscape where community engagement continues to evolve within established legal and regulatory frameworks. Pakistan's governance structure provides avenues for organization and advocacy, particularly in social, developmental, and community-based initiatives. The results point toward opportunities to further strengthen facilitation mechanisms, enhance coordination, and build greater public confidence in participatory processes that contribute to inclusive and constructive civic engagement.

10.3 Economic Freedom & Opportunity

Citizens exercise occupational choice within a supportive and expanding economic framework

Survey responses reflect a strongly positive perception regarding citizens' freedom to choose their occupation. On a 1–7 scale (where 1 indicates strong disagreement and 7 indicates strong agreement), only 4% of respondents (3% selecting 2 and 1% selecting 3) expressed reservations, while 19% remained neutral. A clear majority—77% of respondents (32% selecting 5, 25% selecting 6, and 20% selecting 7)—indicated a favorable assessment.

Citizens have the freedom to choose their occupation



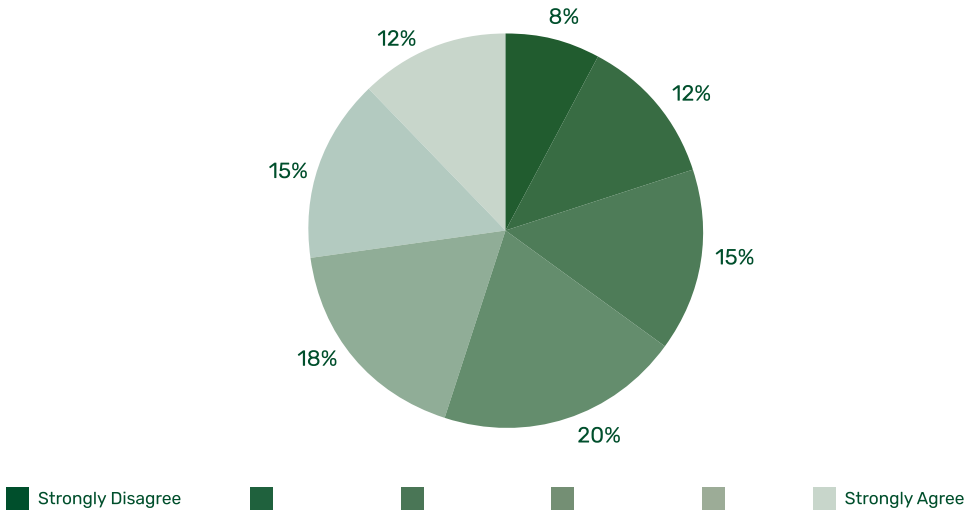
Overall, the findings highlight a robust and enabling environment for occupational choice. Pakistan's economic and regulatory frameworks support a wide range of professional pathways across sectors, reinforced by ongoing reforms, skills development initiatives, and expanding opportunities in both traditional

and emerging industries. The results underscore continued progress while pointing toward further potential to enhance access, innovation, and workforce participation across the country.

Property rights are safeguarded within a well-established legal and institutional framework

Survey responses reflect a balanced and moderately positive perception regarding the protection of property rights. On a 1–7 scale (where 1 indicates strong disagreement and 7 indicates strong agreement), 35% of respondents (8% selecting 1, 12% selecting 2, and 15% selecting 3) expressed some concerns, while 20% remained neutral. At the same time, a slightly higher 45% (18% selecting 5, 15% selecting 6, and 12% selecting 7) indicated confidence in the legal protection of property rights.

Property rights are protected by law

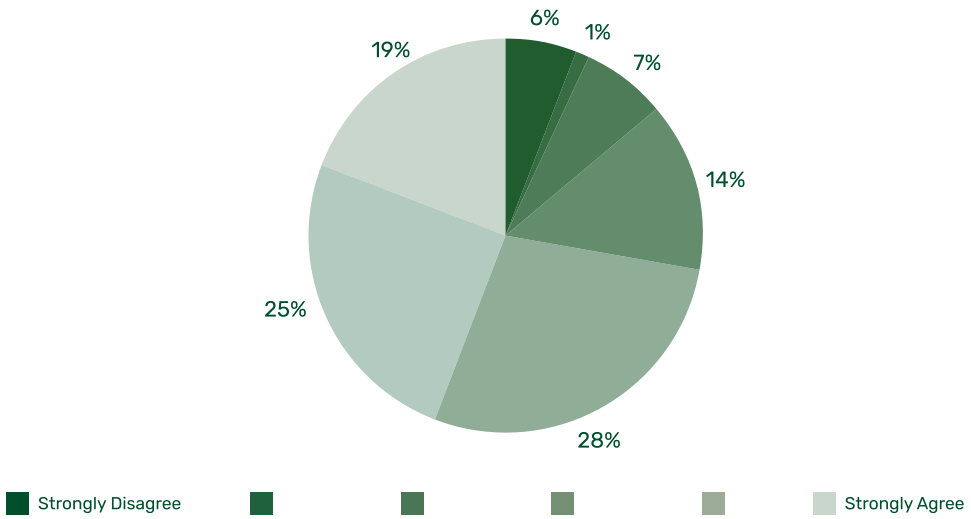


Overall, the distribution points toward a generally favorable outlook, supported by Pakistan's established legal framework governing ownership, contracts, and dispute resolution. Institutional mechanisms, including the judiciary and land administration systems, continue to provide the basis for enforcement and protection. The findings highlight ongoing progress while also indicating opportunities to further strengthen implementation, streamline processes, and enhance public confidence in property rights protections across the country.

Businesses operate within a facilitative and increasingly enabling regulatory environment

Survey responses reflect a strongly positive perception regarding the extent of government engagement in business operations. On a 1–7 scale (where 1 indicates strong disagreement and 7 indicates strong agreement), only 11% of respondents (3% selecting 1, 1% selecting 2, and 7% selecting 3) expressed reservations, while 14% remained neutral. A clear majority—75% of respondents (28% selecting 5, 25% selecting 6, and 22% selecting 7)—indicated a favorable assessment, suggesting that businesses largely operate without undue interference.

Businesses operate without undue government interference

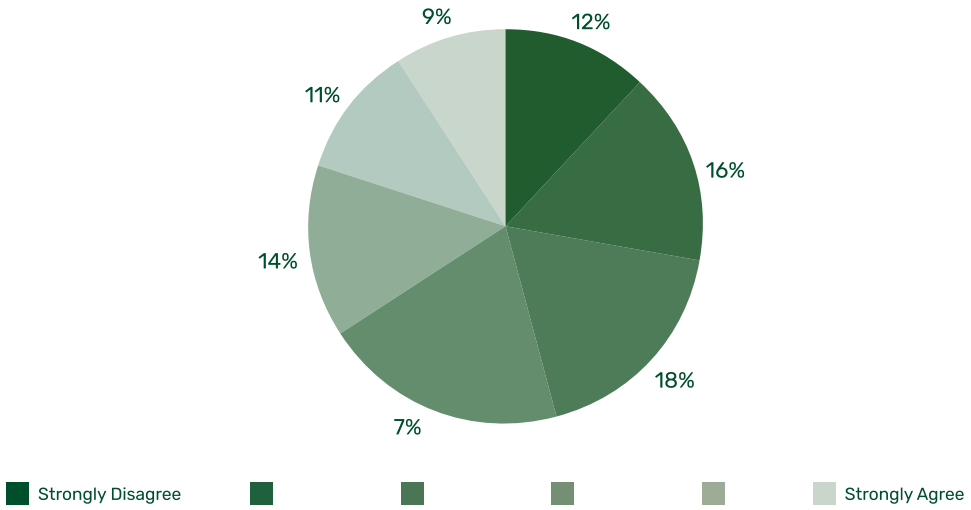


Overall, the findings highlight a supportive business climate underpinned by regulatory reforms, facilitation initiatives, and a growing emphasis on ease of doing business. Pakistan's policy direction continues to focus on reducing procedural bottlenecks, improving investor confidence, and fostering a competitive economic environment. The results underscore sustained progress while pointing toward further opportunities to streamline regulations and enhance the overall business ecosystem.

Businesses operate within a facilitative and reform-oriented regulatory environment

Survey responses reflect a largely positive perception regarding the extent of government engagement in business operations. On a 1–7 scale (where 1 indicates strong disagreement and 7 indicates strong agreement), only 11% of respondents (3% selecting 1, 1% selecting 2, and 7% selecting 3) expressed reservations, while 14% remained neutral. A strong majority—75% of respondents (28% selecting 5, 25% selecting 6, and 22% selecting 7)—indicated a favorable assessment, suggesting that businesses generally operate without undue interference.

Competition in the market is faair and healthy



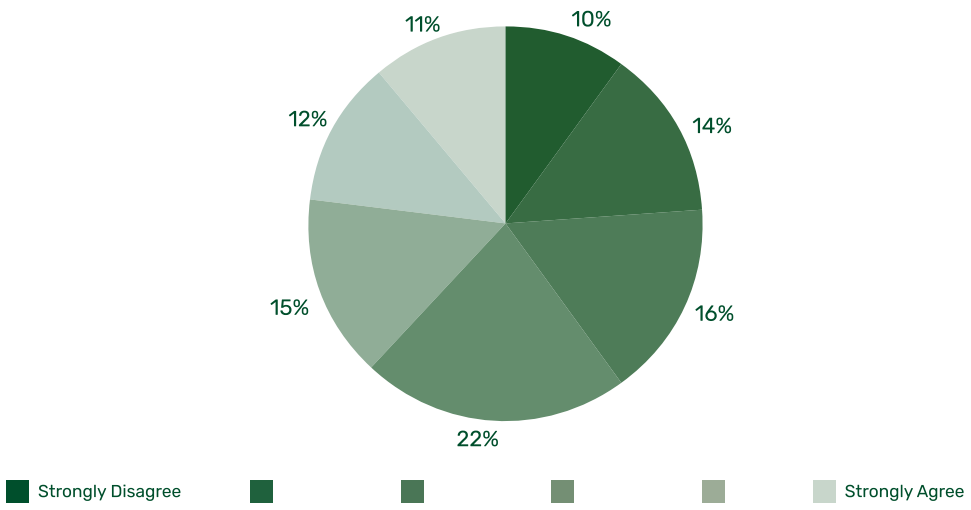
Overall, the findings highlight a progressively enabling business environment supported by ongoing regulatory reforms and facilitation measures. Pakistan's policy approach continues to emphasize ease of doing business, investor confidence, and private sector growth, with efforts aimed at reducing administrative complexities and promoting a more predictable and transparent operating framework. These trends underscore sustained progress and signal further potential for strengthening a competitive and business-friendly economic landscape.

Businesses operate within a facilitative and progressively streamlined regulatory environment

Survey responses reflect a strong and broadly positive perception regarding the extent of government engagement in business operations. On a 1–7 scale (where 1 indicates strong disagreement and 7 indicates strong agreement), only 11% of respondents (3% selecting 1, 1% selecting 2, and 7% selecting 3) expressed reservations, while 14% remained neutral. A clear and substantial majority—75% of respondents (28% selecting 5, 25% selecting 6, and 22% selecting 7)—indicated a favorable assessment, suggesting that businesses largely operate without undue interference.

Overall, the findings underscore a supportive business climate shaped by ongoing reforms and facilitation measures. Pakistan's economic policy direction continues to prioritize ease of doing business, regulatory simplification, and investor confidence, with sustained efforts to create a more transparent, predictable, and growth-oriented environment. This trajectory reflects continued progress toward strengthening a competitive and enabling ecosystem for enterprise and innovation.

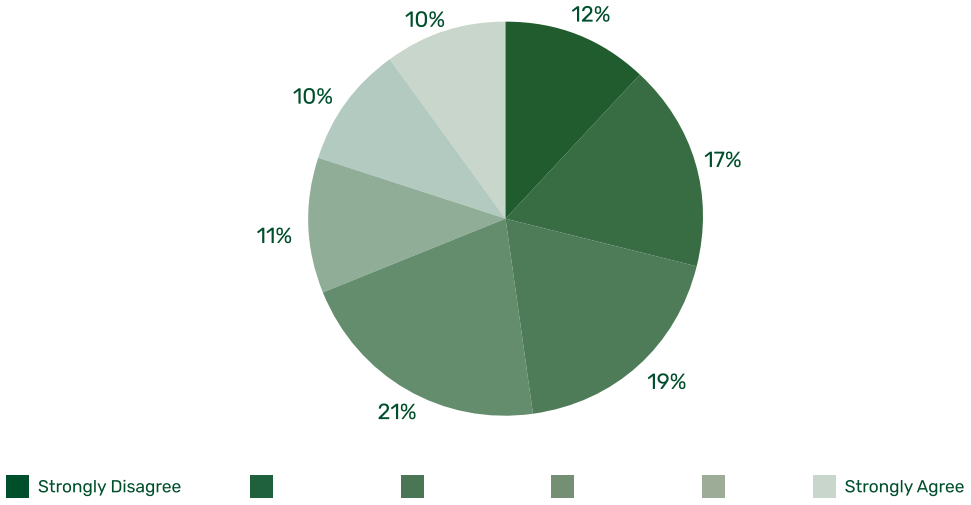
Trade policies support business growth



Market competition operates within a developing and increasingly regulated framework

Survey responses reflect a balanced and evolving perception regarding the fairness and competitiveness of the market environment. On a 1–7 scale (where 1 indicates strong disagreement and 7 indicates strong agreement), 46% of respondents (12% selecting 1, 16% selecting 2, and 18% selecting 3) expressed some concerns, while 20% remained neutral. At the same time, a notable 34% (14% selecting 5, 11% selecting 6, and 9% selecting 7) indicated a positive assessment of market competition.

Economic mobility (moving up the income ladder) is possible

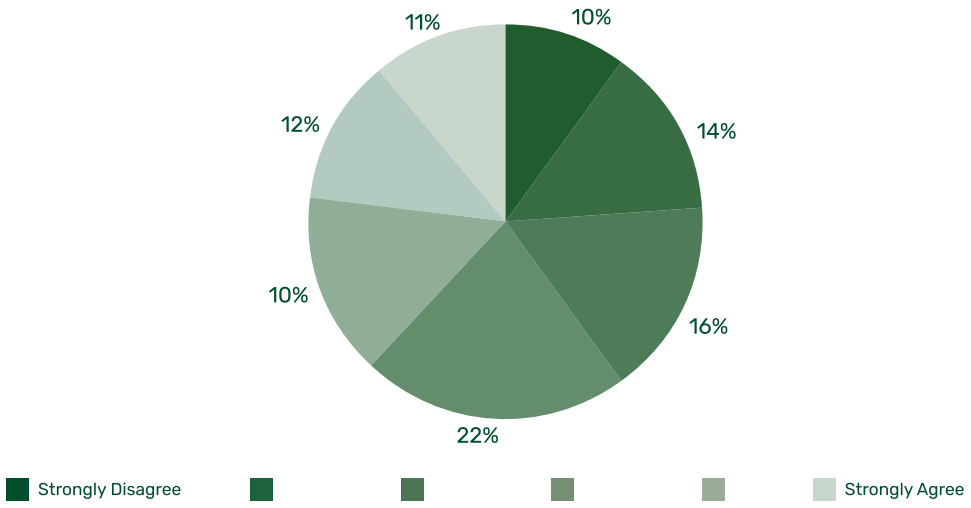


Overall, the findings highlight a dynamic economic landscape where competition continues to mature within an established regulatory framework. Pakistan's institutions, including competition and market oversight bodies, play an important role in promoting transparency, preventing anti-competitive practices, and ensuring a level playing field. The results point toward ongoing progress, with opportunities to further strengthen regulatory enforcement, market transparency, and investor confidence to support a more robust and competitive business environment.

Trade policies are evolving to support business growth and economic expansion

Survey responses reflect a balanced and developing perception regarding the effectiveness of trade policies in supporting business growth. On a 1–7 scale (where 1 indicates strong disagreement and 7 indicates strong agreement), 40% of respondents (10% selecting 1, 14% selecting 2, and 16% selecting 3) expressed some reservations, while a significant 22% remained neutral. At the same time, a notable 38% (15% selecting 5, 12% selecting 6, and 11% selecting 7) indicated a positive assessment.

Trade policies support business growth



Overall, the findings highlight an evolving trade policy landscape aimed at facilitating growth, competitiveness, and market access. Pakistan's policy direction continues to focus on export promotion, diversification, and integration into regional and global value chains, supported by ongoing reforms and institutional measures. The results point toward continued progress, with opportunities to further strengthen policy implementation, reduce barriers, and enhance the overall effectiveness of trade frameworks in driving sustainable business growth.

Economic mobility is supported through ongoing reforms and expanding opportunity frameworks

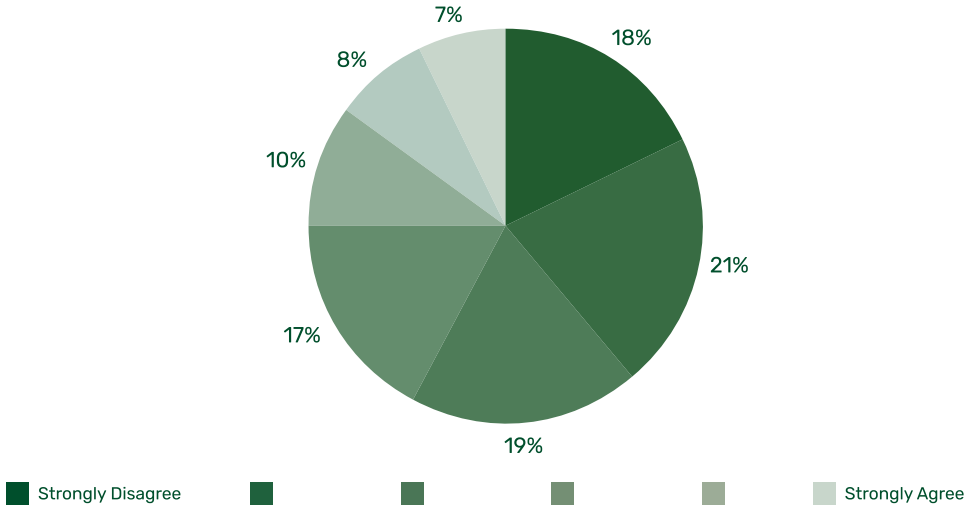
Survey responses reflect a balanced and evolving perception regarding the possibility of upward economic mobility. On a 1–7 scale (where 1 indicates strong disagreement and 7 indicates strong agreement), 48% of respondents (12% selecting 1, 17% selecting 2, and 19% selecting 3) expressed reservations, while a significant 21% remained neutral. At the same time, 31% of respondents (11% selecting 5, 10% selecting 6, and 10% selecting 7) indicated a more positive outlook.

Overall, the findings highlight both the challenges and the opportunities within Pakistan's economic landscape. The government's policy direction continues to focus on inclusive growth, job creation, skills development, and entrepreneurship, aimed at expanding pathways for upward mobility. These results point toward a transitional phase, where ongoing reforms and targeted interventions are expected to further enhance access to economic opportunities and strengthen confidence in long-term advancement prospects.

Financial empowerment and security are being strengthened through targeted economic measures

Survey responses reflect a range of public perceptions regarding financial empowerment and security. On a 1–7 scale (where 1 indicates strong disagreement and 7 indicates strong agreement), 58% of respondents (18% selecting 1, 21% selecting 2, and 19% selecting 3) expressed concerns, while 17% remained neutral. At the same time, 25% of respondents (10% selecting 5, 8% selecting 6, and 7% selecting 7) indicated a more positive outlook.

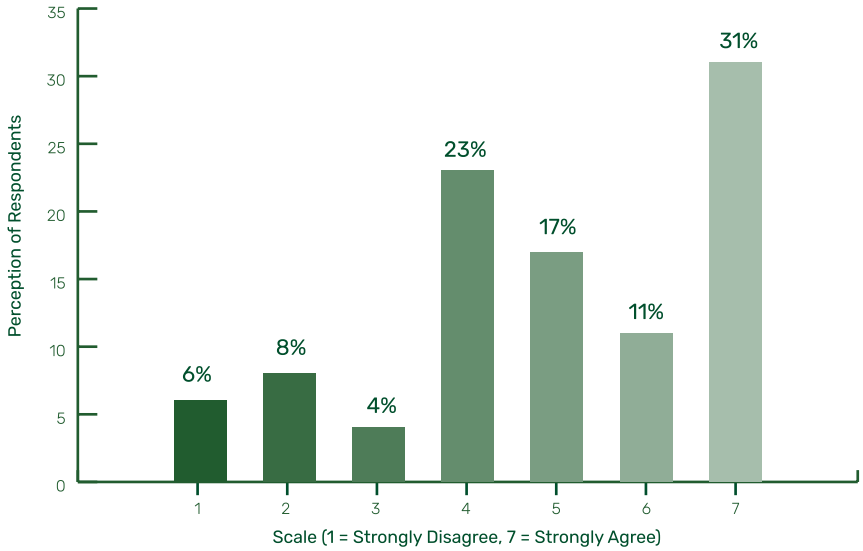
Citizens feel financially empowered and secure



National Defense Institutions and the Security Environment for Freedoms

The survey responses reflect a generally positive public perception regarding the role of Pakistan's national defense institutions in maintaining national security and safeguarding the country's frontiers. A significant proportion of respondents expressed agreement with the view that national defense institutions contribute toward ensuring a secure environment necessary for the exercise of civic, social, and constitutional freedoms. On the 1–7 scale, 31% of respondents strongly agreed with the statement, while an additional 11% selected 6 and 17% selected 5, indicating a broadly favorable assessment. Meanwhile, 23% of respondents remained neutral, reflecting a balanced segment of public opinion. Lower levels of disagreement were recorded at the negative end of the scale, suggesting comparatively limited skepticism regarding the role of defense institutions in supporting national stability and security.

Perception of Nationa Defence Institutions and Security Environment

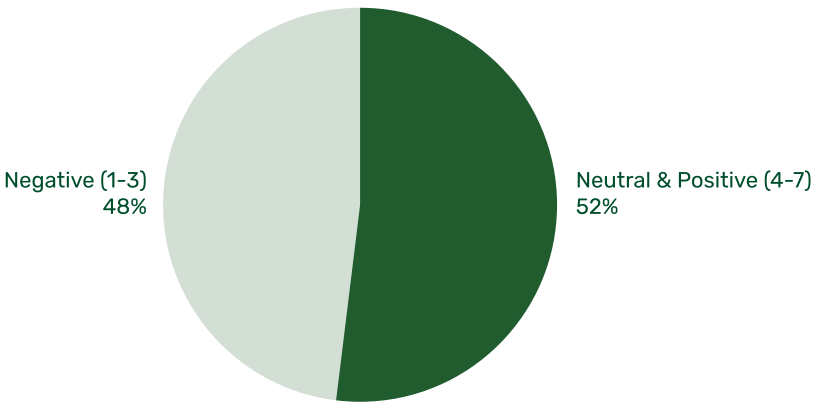


Overall, the findings indicate that a majority of respondents associate national security institutions with the maintenance of stability, territorial integrity, and the broader enabling environment within which democratic and civic freedoms operate.

Public Perception of the Government's Long-Term Vision and Strategic Direction

The survey responses reflect a mixed but moderately balanced public perception regarding the extent to which the Government of Pakistan is viewed as having a long-term national vision in place. On the 1–7 scale, the largest proportion of respondents (29%) selected the neutral midpoint of 4, indicating cautious or undecided views on the government's long-term strategic direction. At the lower end of the scale, 16% selected 1, 11% selected 2, and 21% selected 3, reflecting varying degrees of skepticism regarding long-term planning and policy continuity. At the same time, a notable segment expressed positive perceptions, with 7% selecting 5, 9% selecting 6, and 7% selecting 7, suggesting that a portion of respondents recognize ongoing efforts toward strategic governance, institutional reforms, and long-term policy planning.

Public Perception of Goverment's Long Term Vision

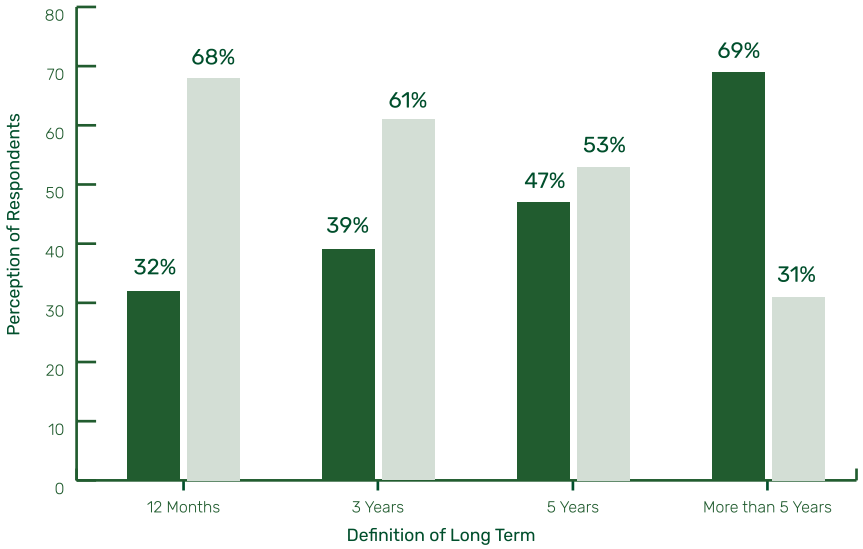


Overall, the responses indicate an evolving public discourse around national vision, governance continuity, and the long-term direction of state policy and development initiatives.

Public Understanding of the Definition of "Long Term"

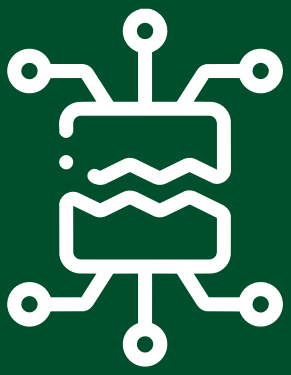
The survey responses indicate that respondents generally associate the concept of a "long term" vision with planning horizons extending beyond immediate or short-duration policy cycles. Only 32% of respondents considered 12 months to represent a long-term timeframe, while 39% viewed 3 years as long term. Perceptions became more favorable with extended durations, as 47% identified 5 years as constituting a long-term period. A significant majority of respondents (69%) considered a timeframe of more than 5 years to represent a true long-term vision.

Perception of Nationa Defence Institutions and Security Environment



The findings suggest that the public largely associates long-term governance and strategic planning with sustained, multi-year policy continuity and development frameworks extending well beyond short-term administrative cycles.

Overall, the findings highlight the ongoing challenges associated with economic stability, while also underscoring the importance of continued policy focus in this area. Pakistan's economic strategy is increasingly oriented toward strengthening financial inclusion, expanding social protection mechanisms, and supporting income generation through employment and entrepreneurship initiatives. These results point toward a transitional phase, where sustained reforms and targeted interventions are expected to enhance financial resilience and improve the overall sense of economic security among citizens.



Chapter 11:

Sectoral Deep Dives

This chapter examines how “freedom” and “resilience” are produced, or constrained, inside five high-impact sectors that shape public life: media; higher education; civil society; business and entrepreneurship; and religious/cultural institutions. Rather than treating rights as abstract constitutional promises, the sectoral approach maps (i) who holds operational power, (ii) which laws and administrative tools are routinely invoked, (iii) where economic dependencies create “soft censorship,” and (iv) how sociocultural pressures and violence narrow the space for pluralism.

Freedom and Resilience in High-Impact Sectors



Figure : Freedom and Resilience in High-Impact Sectors, The Freedom Report 2026

Across sectors, four recurring constraint mechanisms appear most "load-bearing" in Pakistan's current governance environment:

First, regulatory and licensing frameworks provide executive agencies with important tools to guide sectoral conduct and ensure compliance with established standards. These mechanisms operate across areas such as broadcast regulation, online content governance, and the oversight of non-governmental organizations, including through licensing processes, codes of conduct, and administrative requirements. As these frameworks continue to evolve, there is increasing emphasis on enhancing transparency, consistency, and alignment with legal safeguards, ensuring that regulatory objectives are met while supporting a predictable and enabling environment for stakeholders.

Second, the digital ecosystem plays an increasingly central role across multiple sectors, serving as a key interface for communication, collaboration, and economic activity. Measures such as content management, platform regulation, and, at times, temporary connectivity adjustments are generally aimed at addressing evolving challenges related to security, misinformation, and public order. While these measures can influence sectors such as media, academia, civil society, and business, ongoing efforts are focused on enhancing predictability, minimizing disruptions, and ensuring that the digital environment continues to support innovation, investment, and broad-based participation.

Third, economic factors, including public-sector support and broader market conditions, play an important role in shaping the functioning of institutions across media, academia, and civil society. Public-sector engagement, such as advertising and funding support, often contributes to the sustainability of these sectors, particularly in evolving markets. As the ecosystem continues to develop, there is growing emphasis on strengthening financial resilience, encouraging diversified funding streams, and enhancing transparency. These efforts aim to support a stable, independent, and sustainable institutional environment that can effectively contribute to national development.

Fourth, sociocultural sensitivities and evolving public dynamics can influence how individuals and institutions engage with certain topics, particularly those related to religion, identity, and public discourse. In such contexts, there may be a tendency toward cautious engagement on issues perceived as sensitive. Instances of heightened public reaction have underscored the importance of responsible expression, dialogue, and awareness. In response, there is increasing emphasis on strengthening legal protections, promoting tolerance, and enhancing institutional mechanisms to ensure that public discourse remains constructive, respectful, and aligned with broader societal stability.

Despite these constraints, resilience strengths exist: diversified media consumption, growing investigative/documentation capacity among Pakistani watchdogs, active legal contestation in superior courts, emergent fintech and tech-zone frameworks, and deep networks of community institutions that can be mobilized for inclusion, if governance incentives are rebalanced toward rights-based accountability.

11.1 Media ecosystem

In Pakistan, media's core public functions include agenda-setting, watchdog reporting, emergency information, plural debate, and cultural narration in a multilingual environment. The risk profile is shaped by the fact that journalism often intersects with high-stakes domains, national security, corruption, electoral disputes, and identity conflicts, where both state and non-state actors have incentives to manage narratives.

Formal regulatory oversight for private electronic media in Pakistan is exercised through the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA), established under the PEMRA Ordinance, with responsibilities covering licensing, compliance, and content standards. In the digital domain, the Pakistan Telecommunication

Authority (PTA) plays a key role in managing online access and content governance, operating within the framework of cybercrime legislation and related rules, including provisions for content management and removal where necessary.

In addition to regulatory bodies, a range of professional and monitoring actors, such as journalist unions, press organizations, and independent media observers, contribute to maintaining standards, supporting accountability, and documenting developments within the media landscape. Collectively, these institutions form a multi-layered ecosystem aimed at promoting responsible media practices while facilitating an open and evolving information environment.

Constitutionally, freedoms of speech and the press are recognized in Pakistan, within a framework that includes defined considerations such as respect for religion, national security, public order, and societal norms. In practice, the regulatory environment operates across several interconnected areas. These include content governance under cyber-related legislation and associated rules; broadcast licensing systems and professional codes of conduct; legal provisions addressing defamation and misinformation; and broader considerations related to the safety and security of media practitioners in both physical and digital spaces.

As this landscape continues to evolve, there is an increasing focus on ensuring that these frameworks are applied in a transparent, consistent, and balanced manner, supporting responsible expression while safeguarding public interest and institutional stability.

Media dynamics in Pakistan are closely interconnected with broader societal and institutional processes. Coverage can influence civic engagement, while academic research and teaching contribute to informed public discourse. Similarly, a stable and predictable digital environment supports business activity, particularly in areas such as marketing, communication, and digital transactions. Cultural and religious considerations also play a role in shaping the boundaries of public dialogue, reflecting the diverse social context in which media operates.

Within this interconnected landscape, regulatory approaches related to digital governance and public order have cross-sector implications, given the shared reliance on communication infrastructure and information flows. As a result, there is increasing emphasis on ensuring that these frameworks are applied in a balanced and coordinated manner, supporting stability while enabling constructive engagement across sectors.

In 2025, documented incidents concerning journalists in Pakistan, as reported by monitoring organizations such as Freedom Network, indicate an evolving media environment with ongoing challenges and responses. The total number of reported cases is estimated to range between 137 for the year, and 233 total incidents through April 2026, reflecting trends that are continuously being monitored and updated. A significant proportion of these cases relate to threats and harassment, while other categories include physical incidents, administrative measures, and legal proceedings under various applicable laws.

Table 11.1 Reported Cases and Complaints Relating to Journalists and Media Professionals in Pakistan (2025)

Category of Complaint / Incident	Reported Cases / Incidents	Source / Reporting Institution
Total documented incidents targeting journalists and media professionals	137 incidents	Pakistan Press Foundation / media freedom reporting
FIRs / legal cases registered against journalists	30 cases	Pakistan Press Foundation reporting
Cases registered under PECA-related provisions	22 cases	Pakistan Press Foundation reporting
FIA / NCCIA actions and inquiries involving journalists or digital content	23 actions	Pakistan Press Foundation reporting
Reported harassment cases involving journalists	7 cases	Pakistan Press Foundation reporting
Threats issued against journalists	7 incidents	Pakistan Press Foundation reporting
Threats of legal action	3 incidents	Pakistan Press Foundation reporting
Journalists arrested or detained	8 incidents	Pakistan Press Foundation reporting
Journalists placed on no-fly lists	2 incidents	Pakistan Press Foundation reporting
Internet / mobile suspension incidents affecting media operations	6 incidents	Pakistan Press Foundation reporting
YouTube channels blocked / restricted	27 channels	Judicial / regulatory actions reported in media freedom reviews
National Cyber Crime Investigation Agency “anti-hate propaganda” cases	356 cases (overall digital cases)	Official records cited in IFJ report
NCCIA inquiries into social media content hostile to state institutions	789 inquiries	Official records cited in IFJ report

Contextual Note

According to journalist organizations and media monitoring institutions, many of the complaints and reported incidents in 2025 related to harassment, legal scrutiny, online abuse, digital regulation, and safety concerns affecting media professionals. At the same time, the Government of Pakistan has emphasized that several regulatory and cyber-related measures are aimed at addressing misinformation, unlawful digital activity, hate speech, and national security concerns within an increasingly complex media and digital environment.

These figures, based on cumulative reporting and trend assessments, highlight the importance of continued efforts to strengthen protections for journalists, enhance institutional responses, and promote a safe and enabling environment for media professionals. Ongoing initiatives by the state and stakeholders aim to address these concerns through improved safeguards, legal clarity, and engagement with media organizations.

The media landscape in 2025 reflects an evolving and increasingly structured regulatory environment, where legal frameworks are playing a more prominent role in shaping engagement between the state and media professionals. The use of provisions such as PECA and related laws indicates a shift toward formalized and institutional mechanisms aimed at ensuring responsible journalism, addressing misinformation, and maintaining public order. As a result, interactions between journalists and regulatory authorities are increasingly taking place through established legal processes, including complaints, inquiries, and formal proceedings.

At the same time, challenges related to professional safety and the broader information environment continue to receive attention. Instances of threats and harassment, particularly in the digital space, highlight the growing complexity of online discourse, where journalists may encounter coordinated narratives, criticism, or reputational pressures from a range of actors. This underscores the importance of strengthening digital safeguards, promoting responsible online behavior, and enhancing support systems for media professionals.

Incidents involving physical risk, while comparatively less frequent, remain an area of concern in specific contexts, such as during large public gatherings or in regions with more complex security dynamics. Encouragingly, the overall trend suggests a movement toward institutional and procedural approaches, with a greater reliance on legal and administrative processes rather than ad hoc measures.

Custodial actions and short-term legal proceedings are generally undertaken within the framework of existing laws, often in response to specific situations. These processes typically follow due course, with an emphasis on resolution through established legal channels. Their application reflects the state's broader objective of managing sensitive situations while maintaining legal oversight.

Regionally, variations in reported incidents reflect differences in administrative structures and local contexts. Islamabad, as the federal center, naturally accounts for a higher concentration of regulatory and legal activity, while other provinces reflect diverse patterns shaped by local governance, media presence, and security considerations. At the same time, ongoing efforts are being made to improve reporting mechanisms and data coverage across regions.

Overall, the 2025 media environment points to a phase of transition, where regulatory clarity, institutional processes, and digital governance are becoming more central to the functioning of the media ecosystem. While challenges remain, continued focus on strengthening legal safeguards, enhancing institutional capacity, and fostering constructive engagement between stakeholders can contribute to a more balanced, secure, and sustainable media environment in Pakistan.

11.1a Policy and civil-society recommendations (media).

Strengthening media freedom in Pakistan requires a coordinated policy and civil society response that moves beyond reactive measures toward systemic reform. At the policy level, there is a need to review and recalibrate laws to prevent misuse against journalists, alongside establishing clear safeguards for freedom of expression and due process. Independent oversight mechanisms should be strengthened to ensure accountability in cases of harassment, arrests, and legal intimidation. Simultaneously, civil society organizations must play a more proactive role in documenting violations, providing legal aid, and building coalitions to advocate for press freedom. Investment in digital safety training, especially for women journalists, and the creation of rapid response networks can help mitigate emerging threats in the online space. Together, these efforts can contribute to a more resilient media ecosystem where journalists are protected, and democratic discourse is preserved.

Some forward-looking measures, building on existing reforms and institutional strengths, may further enhance the effectiveness and credibility of the media and digital governance ecosystem:

1. **Refinement of digital governance frameworks:** Continued review of PECA and related rules can help enhance clarity, procedural transparency, and alignment with constitutional principles, including clear

definitions, structured processes, and accessible review mechanisms.

2. **Strengthening regulatory processes:** Ongoing efforts to enhance transparency in appointments, tenure stability, and the publication of regulatory decisions can further reinforce institutional confidence and consistency.
3. **Enhancing journalist protection mechanisms:** Building on existing legal frameworks, including the Protection of Journalists and Media Professionals Act, further operational strengthening, such as resource allocation, coordination, and implementation benchmarks, can support journalist safety and welfare.
4. **Evolving defamation frameworks:** Continued emphasis on balanced legal remedies, procedural safeguards, and judicial oversight can help ensure that dispute resolution mechanisms remain fair and proportionate.
5. **Promoting transparency in public communication support:** Strengthening disclosure practices around public-sector advertising allocations and criteria can contribute to greater transparency and predictability in the media economy.
6. **Advancing digital transparency practices:** The development of structured reporting and review protocols for content management actions can enhance public understanding and institutional accountability.
7. **Encouraging sustainable media ecosystems:** Supporting diversified funding models, capacity-building initiatives, and professional development partnerships can contribute to a more resilient and independent media sector.
8. **Fostering collaborative response mechanisms:** Strengthening coordination among media, civil society, legal support systems, and digital safety initiatives can enhance responsiveness, documentation, and support for media professionals.

Collectively, these measures reflect a constructive pathway toward further strengthening governance frameworks, supporting responsible media practices, and reinforcing a balanced and enabling information environment.

11.2 Academia and universities

Section 11.2 examines universities, research institutions, and the broader knowledge workforce as a critical sector where freedom is expressed through institutional autonomy, campus integrity, and the ability to teach, research, and publish without coercion. Universities perform essential national "capability" functions by producing skilled professional labor, generating research that informs policy and industry, serving as arenas for intellectual debate, and enabling upward social mobility. The freedoms within this sector are particularly significant because academic systems shape the epistemic foundations of media narratives, civil society advocacy, and entrepreneurial ecosystems.

The sector operates through a network of key actors and stakeholders. At the federal level, coordination and standard-setting are primarily led by the Higher Education Commission, alongside provincial higher education departments, accreditation bodies, university governing councils, faculty associations, and student groups. However, the extent of university freedom is also influenced by broader governance dynamics, including security frameworks and campus policing, particularly in relation to student mobilization and research on sensitive or politically charged topics.

Case studies and examples (2015–2026)

- **Academic freedom in a global context (macro perspective):** Cross-national assessments indicate that many countries are navigating evolving challenges related to academic and cultural expression. Within this broader trend, Pakistan's performance reflects an ongoing transition, with continued efforts to strengthen academic environments, improve institutional capacity, and align practices with international standards, while also accounting for local legal and societal contexts.
- **Application of legal frameworks in sensitive cases:** High-profile cases involving academics have underscored the importance of adhering to established legal processes in matters related to sensitive subjects. Such instances highlight the state's responsibility to uphold the rule of law, while also reinforcing the need for safeguards that ensure fairness, due process, and institutional support for all stakeholders involved.

» **Student engagement and campus governance:** Episodes of student mobilization, including during periods such as the pandemic, reflect the active role of youth in institutional life. In certain situations, administrative and law-and-order considerations have guided responses to ensure continuity, safety, and stability on campuses. At the same time, there is increasing emphasis on strengthening dialogue mechanisms to address student concerns in a structured and responsive manner.

» **Evolving governance of higher education institutions:** Policy developments at the provincial level indicate a continued effort to refine governance structures within universities. Measures related to oversight, appointments, and administrative frameworks are generally aimed at enhancing accountability, standardization, and institutional performance, contributing to a more coherent and effective higher education system.

Despite its central importance, Pakistan's academic sector operates within a dynamic environment shaped by legal, regulatory, economic, and sociocultural considerations. Public funding and oversight mechanisms play a vital role in maintaining standards and institutional alignment, while ongoing efforts continue to strengthen governance structures, enhance autonomy, and promote research excellence. Discussions around institutional management, including appointments and administrative frameworks, are part of a broader process of refinement aimed at improving transparency and effectiveness.

Campus environments reflect the diversity of society, with active student engagement and a range of perspectives contributing to intellectual life. At the same time, institutions and authorities continue to work toward maintaining a balanced environment that supports open dialogue while ensuring order and stability. Sensitive subject areas are generally approached with care, reflecting both legal parameters and societal context, with increasing emphasis on responsible scholarship and constructive discourse.

Universities remain a pivotal sector, contributing significantly to national development by preparing future professionals, including journalists, lawyers, civil servants, and entrepreneurs, and generating research that informs both public policy and civil society initiatives. Strengthening academic inquiry and expanding opportunities for research and innovation remain key priorities, particularly as they contribute to enhancing the quality of public discourse and evidence-based policymaking.

At the same time, broader economic and technological developments influence the academic landscape, including funding availability, employment pathways for graduates, and the evolving digital ecosystem. Continued efforts to align education with market needs, expand digital access, and support institutional resilience are helping to ensure that universities remain vibrant centers of learning, innovation, and national progress.

11.2a Policy and civil-society recommendations (academia).

Strengthening academic freedom in Pakistan requires a coherent set of policy and civil-society interventions that safeguard autonomy, protect campus integrity, and enable universities to function as independent spaces of inquiry and debate. As pressures on higher education institutions grow, from governance challenges to sociopolitical sensitivities, there is a need to move from fragmented responses toward a structured reform agenda.

The following recommendations outline practical pathways to reinforce institutional independence, protect faculty and students, and align the academic sector with constitutional guarantees of freedom and expression, while ensuring accountability and resilience within the system.

1. **Adopt a national academic freedom and campus integrity charter** anchored in constitutional rights and endorsed by HEC/university senates, with enforceable grievance pathways.
2. **Strengthen institutional autonomy safeguards:** transparent governing council appointments, merit-based leadership selection, and judicially reviewable procedures for removals.
3. **Create campus ombuds and protection mechanisms** for faculty/students facing threats, integrating legal aid and psychosocial support (especially in blasphemy allegation environments).
4. **Regulate student unions rather than suppress them:** formal recognition with codes of conduct, anti-violence enforcement, and democratic elections, reducing underground politicization.
5. **Firewall academic decision-making from security gatekeeping** by requiring written, appealable orders for event cancellations and speaker restrictions.
6. **Diversify research funding** through competitive grants involving industry and philanthropic contributions,

reducing single-point governmental leverage.

7. **Protect academic digital access** (journals, platforms, collaboration tools) from blanket disruptions through sectoral "critical infrastructure" protocols and impact assessments.
8. **Improve transparency of higher education performance** via open data dashboards (funding allocation, outcomes, governance changes) to reduce rumor-driven politicization.

11.3 Civil society organizations

This section focuses on NGOs/NPOs, rights groups, humanitarian actors, and social movements, an ecosystem that mediates citizen-state relations, provides services, and generates accountability.

Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) deliver welfare and humanitarian services, document human rights conditions, provide civic education, litigate for public interest, and build community-level resilience. In Pakistan's governance context, civil society also functions as an early-warning system for violence, displacement, and discrimination, roles that become sensitive during political polarization and securitized governance.

Key state interfaces for civil society in Pakistan operate through a structured and coordinated framework that ensures transparency, accountability, and alignment with national priorities. Institutions such as the Economic Affairs Division oversee foreign contributions and MoU processes, while the Ministry of Interior manages security clearances and the facilitation of international NGOs. Provincial registration bodies and regulated banking channels further support compliance and financial integrity. Alongside these, a diverse range of non-state actors, including rights organizations, service-delivery NGOs, women's groups, community-based initiatives, and development partners, contribute actively to social development and public welfare.

The operational environment for civil society reflects a regulated and evolving system designed to promote responsible engagement. Registration processes, project approvals, and compliance requirements, particularly for organizations receiving foreign contributions, are part of a broader governance approach aimed at ensuring transparency, accountability, and alignment with national development goals. Recent policy measures have further streamlined oversight of funding flows, contributing to improved coordination and institutional clarity.

Civil society organizations also operate within a broader governance context that balances facilitation with public order considerations. Measures related to public gatherings, digital governance, and compliance are generally implemented to ensure stability and responsible civic engagement. At the same time, there is increasing emphasis on enhancing dialogue, reducing administrative friction, and strengthening trust between stakeholders, including government institutions, civil society actors, and development partners.

The effectiveness of civil society continues to be supported by its linkages with media, academia, and the digital ecosystem, which enable outreach, evidence-based advocacy, and service delivery. Efforts are underway to foster greater collaboration across these sectors, ensuring that civil society initiatives are both impactful and aligned with national priorities.

International assessments of civic space reflect a range of perspectives and methodologies. Within this context, Pakistan's regulatory environment can be understood as a structured framework that enables civil society operations while emphasizing accountability, transparency, and national interest considerations. Ongoing reforms and stakeholder engagement are increasingly focused on enhancing operational ease, improving clarity in regulatory processes, and supporting a more enabling and collaborative civic environment.

11.3a Policy and civil-society recommendations (CSOs).

Strengthening civic space in Pakistan requires a calibrated shift from control-oriented regulation to a more transparent, risk-based, and enabling framework that recognizes civil society organizations (CSOs) as partners in development rather than subjects of suspicion. As regulatory, financial, and operational constraints continue to shape the functioning of CSOs, there is a need for reforms that align oversight with proportionality, ensure procedural clarity, and protect fundamental freedoms.

The following recommendations outline practical steps for policymakers and civil society to build a more predictable, accountable, and collaborative ecosystem that supports civic participation while maintaining necessary safeguards.

1. **Shift to a risk-based, proportionate oversight model** consistent with updated global guidance warning against over-application of AML/CFT standards to suppress civil society (FATF, 2023–2024 guidance trajectory). Financial Action Task Force

2. **Publish clear MoU/approval criteria and appeal timelines** under the EAD policy and portal; require written reasons for refusals and establish an independent review mechanism.
3. **Reduce banking de-risking by design:** standardize compliance checklists, create a "trusted CSO" tier for low-risk organizations, and mandate service continuity during review periods.
4. **Protect human rights defenders (HRDs)** via public protocols against arbitrary travel bans, harassment, and retaliatory prosecutions, with judicial oversight.
5. **Enable domestic philanthropy** (tax and regulatory incentives) to reduce over-reliance on foreign funding and to strengthen social legitimacy of civic work.
6. **Institutionalize "civic consultation"** in policy cycles (especially digital regulation, education policy, and social welfare delivery), using transparent stakeholder engagement structures.
7. **Strengthen civic legal aid ecosystems** to contest arbitrary restrictions and expand constitutional litigation capacity in provinces.
8. **Build cross-sector coalitions** (CSOs + journalists + academics + business associations) to frame civic freedom as developmental infrastructure, not opposition politics.

11.4 Business and entrepreneurship environment

The section assesses the private sector's freedom to start, operate, innovate, and scale, recognizing that economic agency is a core component of societal resilience.

This sector includes SMEs, corporates, startups, the informal economy, and the enabling ecosystem (finance, payments, digital infrastructure, incubators). "Freedom" here is not only about deregulation; it is about predictability, rule-of-law stability, and digital reliability, conditions required for investment, innovation, and job creation.

Monetary and payments governance is anchored in State Bank of Pakistan, including regulation of electronic money institutions and systemic payment modernization. Corporate formation and disclosure governance runs through Securities and Exchange Commission of Pakistan, while taxation and documentation pressures are shaped by the Federal Board of Revenue and provincial revenue authorities. Technology industrial policy includes the Special Technology Zones Authority, created under a dedicated Act to provide incentives and zones.

Governance Structure in Pakistan

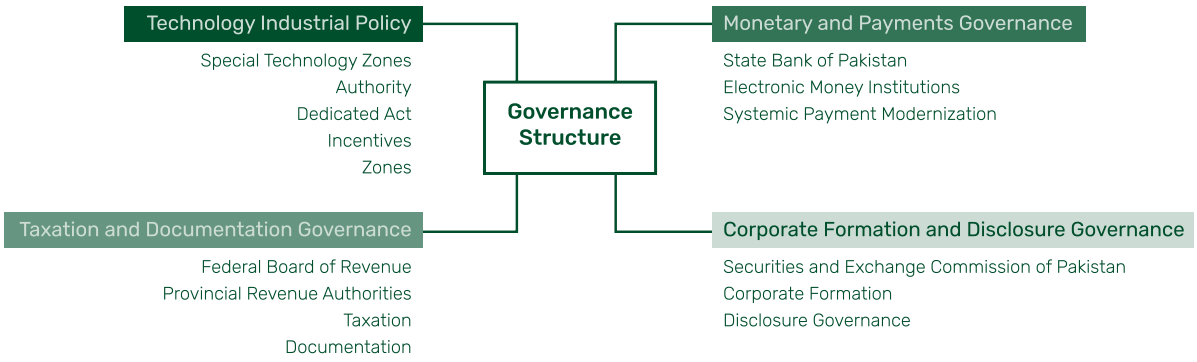


Figure : Business Governance Structure in Pakistan, The Freedom Report 2026

Case studies and examples (2015–2026).

» **Tech-zone institutionalization (2021 onward):** The STZA Act establishes a statutory authority and incentive framework to draw investment and develop technology zones; official yearbooks emphasize fiscal incentives, developer/enterprise licensing, and ecosystem-building objectives.

» **Fintech and payments regulation (2019–2023):** SBP's EMI regulations (2019) and revised regulations (2023) expanded wallet limits and enabled additional services, signaling a controlled liberalization pathway for digital payments and e-commerce.

» **Startup funding contraction (2022–2024):** Pakistan-facing ecosystem reporting

shows a steep decline in funding and deal activity between 2022 and 2024, attributed to macro adjustments and investor risk repricing, an economic constraint that reduces entrepreneurial freedom to scale.

» **Economic considerations related to connectivity management (2024):** Reporting has highlighted that temporary internet management measures during sensitive periods in 2024, such as elections and public gatherings, were associated with short-term economic effects. These measures are typically undertaken to support public order and security objectives. At the same time, there is growing policy focus on minimizing disruptions, enhancing predictability, and strengthening digital resilience to ensure business continuity and maintain a stable, investor-friendly environment.

» **Firewall and content-control debates (2024):** Business and IT-sector concerns about a national firewall or intensified monitoring highlight how information control strategies can impose "hidden taxes" on digital commerce through latency, outages, and reputational risk.

The business sector depends on universities for talent and research commercialization, on media for market information and reputation signaling, and on civil society for social trust and workforce inclusion. At the same time, when media and civic space shrink, corruption and uncertainty risks rise, which can elevate transaction costs and depress investment feedback loops that constrain entrepreneurship. Digital restrictions are a particularly direct cross-sector transmission mechanism: a platform block harms media publishing, activist mobilization, and business marketing simultaneously.

Pakistan Startup Ecosystem (2022–2025)

The figures presented for Pakistan's startup ecosystem (2022–2025) are best-estimate ranges derived from multiple industry trackers (e.g., Data Darbar, Invest2Innovate, MAGNiTT, and press-reported deal flows). Pakistan does not have a centralized, official dataset that comprehensively captures startup investment, company formation, or employment metrics.

Pakistan's startup ecosystem experienced a boom-bust-adjustment cycle between 2022 and 2025. The year 2022 marked a historic peak, with record venture capital inflows and rapid startup formation, particularly in fintech, e-commerce, and logistics. This expansion translated into significant job creation and optimism around Pakistan as an emerging tech market.

However, 2023 saw a sharp contraction driven by global venture capital tightening, domestic macroeconomic instability, and currency depreciation. Investment inflows dropped by nearly 75–80%, triggering widespread layoffs, shutdowns, and a slowdown in new company formation. The ecosystem entered a correction phase where survival became the priority.

In 2024, the market began stabilizing, with startups shifting toward unit economics, revenue generation, and operational efficiency. While funding remained limited, the ecosystem matured, focusing on sustainable business models rather than growth at all costs. Job creation remained constrained, with selective hiring replacing aggressive expansion.

By 2025, early signs of recovery emerged. Investment levels remain below peak years but show gradual improvement, driven by local investors, diaspora capital, and sectoral diversification into AI, SaaS, and climate tech. Startup formation is more cautious and quality-driven, and employment trends indicate modest recovery. The ecosystem is transitioning from hype-driven growth to a more resilient and disciplined innovation economy.

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11.4a Policy and civil-society recommendations (business).

Strengthening Pakistan's business environment requires a balanced approach that combines regulatory clarity, digital resilience, and inclusive growth with strong accountability mechanisms. As the economy becomes increasingly digitized and startup-driven, uncertainties around internet access, taxation, financial flows, and legal enforcement continue to shape investor confidence and enterprise sustainability. There is a growing need to align economic policy with predictable governance, protect digital and commercial freedoms, and foster trust between the state, private sector, and civil society.

The following recommendations outline practical steps to create a more enabling, transparent, and competitive business ecosystem that supports innovation while safeguarding institutional integrity.

1. **Treat internet continuity as economic critical infrastructure:** publish protocols limiting shutdowns to narrowly defined emergencies, with post-event transparency and judicial oversight.
2. **Regulatory predictability compact for startups:** fast-track registrations, simplify tax documentation for early-stage ventures, and create an FX facilitation window for legitimate software/export and venture flows (compliance + growth).
3. **Scale digital payments safely** by accelerating EMI supervision capacity and consumer protection enforcement while expanding permitted services through clear rulemaking.
4. **Strengthen dispute resolution and contract enforcement** through specialized commercial benches and ADR support tied to chambers/incubators.
5. **Transparent incentive governance** for tech zones and industrial policy: publish beneficiary data, evaluation criteria, and outcomes (jobs, exports, investment) to prevent capture.
6. **Protect digital expression for commerce:** separate genuine cybercrime enforcement from political content control to reduce investor risk premiums.
7. **Promote inclusive entrepreneurship** via targeted support for women and marginalized groups (finance access, safety, and market entry), using measurable program KPIs.
8. **Civil society-business integrity partnerships** (anti-corruption, data transparency, consumer rights) to strengthen trust and reduce "informality traps."

11.5 Religious and cultural institutions

Section 11.5 analyzes religious authority structures and cultural production systems (arts, film, publishing, heritage) as institutions that shape moral boundaries, identity politics, and the social costs of dissent.

Religious institutions provide social services, dispute mediation, moral guidance, and identity-based mobilization; cultural institutions produce narratives, arts, entertainment, and heritage continuity. Both are pivotal for pluralism because they influence what communities consider legitimate speech, legitimate belonging, and legitimate critique.

Formal cultural censorship and classification operate through bodies empowered under the Motion Pictures Ordinance and related frameworks, including the Central Board of Film Censors under the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting. Religious education oversight debates involve madrasa boards and state bodies; public reporting highlights MoUs and reform frameworks intended to register and integrate madaris within formal education governance.

Case studies and examples (2015–2026).

- **Asia Bibi acquittal and rule-of-law signal (2018):** Asia Bibi was acquitted by the Supreme Court of Pakistan, with the full text circulated via Pakistan Information Department channels, an example of judicial insistence on evidentiary standards under intense societal pressure.
- **Madrasa governance: 2019 registration/oversight MoU:** Official and media reporting describe efforts to bring madaris into a registration framework and revise curricula/equivalence mechanisms, alongside subsequent resistance framed as a struggle over autonomy.
- **Public order incidents linked to sensitive allegations (2024):** A small number of high-profile cases involving blasphemy allegations led to localized public reactions in 2024. In such situations, law enforcement agencies undertook measures to restore order, secure affected individuals, and prevent escalation. These incidents underscore the importance of continued strengthening of rapid-response capabilities, community engagement, and preventive policing to ensure that legal processes are followed and public safety is maintained.
- **Cultural regulation and the Joyland case (2022–2023):** The film Joyland underwent a review process involving initial restrictions followed by revisions and subsequent approvals, reflecting the functioning of Pakistan's regulatory and consultative mechanisms. The case illustrates how cultural content is evaluated within established frameworks that seek to balance creative expression with societal values and public sensitivities. It also demonstrates the system's capacity for review, dialogue, and adjustment in response to stakeholder engagement.

The most consequential legal constraint cluster is "offences relating to religion," including blasphemy provisions in the Pakistan Penal Code, paired with high social mobilization capacity that can convert allegations into mob violence and extrajudicial outcomes. Cultural expression is constrained through film censorship law and broader media/morality frameworks, while online platforms face periodic bans for "indecent" or "immoral" content, creating a state-society enforcement blend where regulation and social pressure reinforce each other.

Religious sensitivity remains an important social consideration across multiple sectors in Pakistan, influencing public discourse, institutional decision-making, and cultural engagement. In certain contexts, organizations within the media, academia, civil society, and creative industries may adopt cautious approaches when addressing religiously sensitive subjects in order to maintain social harmony, public order, and respect for societal values. At the same time, Pakistan's evolving governance and cultural environment continues to encourage balanced dialogue, responsible expression, and constructive engagement within constitutional and legal frameworks.

The role of responsible religious leadership, interfaith understanding, and culturally respectful public discourse remains significant in strengthening social cohesion, reducing polarization, and promoting a more stable environment for civic participation, academic development, media growth, and creative and economic activity. Policymakers and institutions increasingly recognize that social stability, cultural confidence, and inclusive engagement are important components of long-term national resilience and sustainable development.

At the same time, policymakers and observers have also noted instances where inflammatory rhetoric or emotionally charged religious messaging by certain individuals or groups has contributed to heightened public tensions and social polarization. In some cases, such narratives have amplified public reactions, misinformation, or mob mobilization around sensitive religious issues. Recognizing these challenges, the Government of Pakistan has increasingly emphasized the importance of responsible religious discourse and the prevention of hate speech, incitement, and extremist messaging.

In response, legal and regulatory measures have been strengthened through frameworks such as the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA), provisions of the Pakistan Penal Code relating to hate speech and public order, and the National Action Plan aimed at countering extremism and unlawful incitement. Authorities have also increased monitoring of digital platforms, public speeches, and online content considered capable of provoking violence, sectarian tensions, or social unrest. These measures are broadly positioned as part of the state's efforts to preserve religious harmony, protect public safety, and promote a

more balanced and responsible environment for religious engagement and public communication.

11.5a Policy and civil-society recommendations (religious/cultural).

1. **Anti-mob justice package:** strengthen protective custody procedures, penalize incitement and vigilantism, and create rapid-response protocols to prevent police-station storming events.
2. **Procedural safeguards for blasphemy allegations:** higher evidentiary thresholds for FIR registration, penalties for false accusations, witness protection, and swift judicial oversight to reduce escalation into violence.
3. **Community-based interfaith protection mechanisms** linking local administration, police, and credible religious leaders to de-escalate rumors.
4. **Transparent cultural classification instead of bans:** publish censorship rationales and useage/ classification frameworks wherever possible, aligned with the Motion Pictures Ordinance appeal structure.
5. **Reduce discretionary platform bans** by requiring court-reviewed, time-bounded restrictions and emphasizing targeted enforcement against illegal content.
6. **Madrasa reform via incentives and service integration:** link registration to access to services, teacher training, and recognized pathways into higher education, minimizing coercive confrontation while improving oversight.
7. **Protect artists and cultural workers** through legal aid networks and rapid response when threats emerge; integrate digital security training given online harassment and takedown risks.
8. **Tolerance education and curriculum review** to reduce stigma against minorities and lower the social acceptability of violence (long-term resilience lever).

Pakistan blasphemy accusations, 2024: province-wise total accused

Province / Region	Accused persons	Share
Punjab	213	62%
Sindh	102	30%
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	17	5%
Azad Jammu & Kashmir	8	2%
Gilgit-Baltistan	3	1%
Balochistan	1	<1%
Total	**344**	**100%**

Pakistan blasphemy accusations, 2024: accused by religion / community

Accused community	Accused persons
Muslim	242
Ahmadi	49
Christian	20
Hindu	32
Not known	1
Total	**344**

Pakistan blasphemy accusations, 2024: nature of accusation by legal section

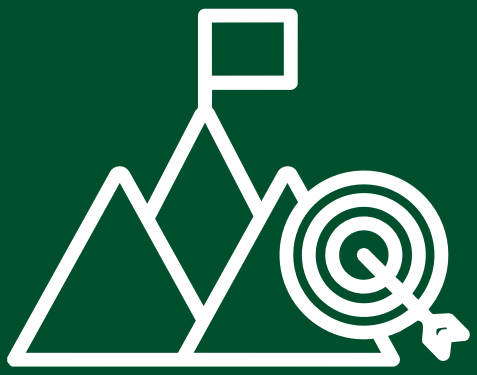
Legal section	Broad nature of accusation	Accused persons
295	Injuring/defiling place of worship or sacred object	35
295-A	Outraging religious feelings / insulting religion or beliefs	106
295-B	Defiling the Holy Quran	31
295-C	Derogatory remarks about the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH)	46
298	Wounding religious feelings	1
298-A	Derogatory remarks about holy personages	128
298-B	Misuse of Islamic epithets/titles by Ahmadis	19
298-C	Ahmadis "posing as Muslims" / preaching or propagating faith	50
PECA	Digital / online expression-related cases	18

11.6 Comparative table across sectors

This section presents a comparative view across key sectors, media, academia, civil society, business, and religious and cultural domains, by mapping their core constraints, existing resilience strengths, and priority reform pathways. This table distills complex sectoral analyses into clear patterns, highlighting how different forms of regulatory pressure, institutional weaknesses, and sociocultural risks shape freedom outcomes. At the same time, it identifies the underlying capacities within each sector that can be leveraged to strengthen resilience. By aligning constraints with targeted, high-impact recommendations, the table offers a practical framework for advancing both fundamental freedoms and broader development objectives in Pakistan.

Sector	Main Constraints	Resilience Strengths	Priority Recommendations
Media	regulator discretion; online content controls; violence/impunity; defamation and "fake news" chilling effects; economic pressure via advertising	diversified platforms and languages; active watchdog documentation; strong public appetite for news	narrow cyber/content powers; implement journalist protection law; transparent advertising allocation; reform defamation
Academia	autonomy erosion; campus integrity risks; securitization of student politics; taboo topics (religion/security); funding dependence	large youth cohort; diaspora and research capacity; growing demand for skills	autonomy safeguards; campus safety/ombuds; regulated student unions; protect academic digital access
Civil society	permissioned registration/MoUs; security vetting; funding/banking friction; assembly restrictions; digital surveillance	dense community networks; rights documentation capacity; litigation pathways	risk-based NGO oversight; publish approval criteria; protect HRDs; enable domestic philanthropy
Business	macro instability; tax/regulatory friction; weak predictability; digital shutdowns; compliance burdens	fintech modernization; tech-zone incentives; entrepreneurial talent	treat internet as critical infrastructure; simplify startup compliance; strengthen dispute resolution; scale payments safely
Religious & cultural	blasphemy law misuse; mob violence; censorship; platform bans; minority insecurity	deep institutional reach; potential for social cohesion; rich cultural production	anti-mob justice; procedural safeguards; transparent classification (not bans); interfaith de-escalation mechanisms

The table compresses sectoral findings into "constraint patterns" and "high-leverage" reforms that would improve both rights and development outcomes.



Chapter 12:

Risk Outlook and Emerging Challenges

Pakistan's freedom landscape is entering a period defined less by isolated crises and more by the convergence of multiple, reinforcing risks. The global environment is increasingly characterized by instability, fragmentation, and competition, where economic systems, political structures, and technological ecosystems are all under simultaneous stress. The latest global risk assessments highlight a shift from cyclical disruptions to a more structural state of uncertainty, one that directly shapes Pakistan's governance and freedom trajectory.

At the forefront of emerging risks is the rise of geoeconomic confrontation. Trade restrictions, supply chain weaponization, sanctions regimes, and financial volatility are no longer exceptional events but embedded features of the global order. For Pakistan, this translates into persistent economic vulnerability. As an import-dependent economy with limited fiscal space, external shocks, particularly in energy and commodities, quickly translate into inflation, currency pressure, and reduced public spending capacity. These pressures disproportionately affect lower-income populations, constraining economic freedom and widening inequality. The challenge is not merely economic stabilization, but building resilience against recurring external disruptions.

Closely linked to this is the growing risk of state-based armed conflict, which has become a defining feature of the regional environment surrounding Pakistan. The western border remains volatile, with tensions between Pakistan and Afghanistan continuing to produce cycles of confrontation, cross-border insecurity, and diplomatic strain. This dynamic is compounded by the presence of non-state actors and the fragility of border governance mechanisms. On the eastern front, relations with India remain structurally tense, with periodic escalations reinforcing a constant state of strategic uncertainty. Even in the absence of sustained conflict, the persistence of military readiness, retaliatory signaling, and unresolved disputes keeps the region on edge.

Beyond immediate neighbors, the widening conflict in the Middle East, particularly involving Iran and broader regional actors, has introduced a new layer of risk. Pakistan's geographic proximity and economic linkages make it highly sensitive to disruptions in energy markets and trade routes. Fluctuations in oil prices, potential constraints on maritime routes such as the Strait of Hormuz, and shifting geopolitical alignments place additional strain on Pakistan's already fragile economic stability. These external shocks ripple through domestic systems, affecting transport costs, industrial output, food prices, and ultimately public welfare.

Another critical risk shaping the future of freedom is the rapid expansion of information disorder and societal polarization. The digital ecosystem has become a central arena where narratives are contested, amplified, and manipulated. Misinformation and disinformation are no longer peripheral challenges; they are now systemic risks that influence political stability, public trust, and institutional legitimacy. In Pakistan, where political polarization remains a defining feature of the landscape, the growing prominence of diverse and often competing narratives, particularly across digital platforms, has made consensus-building more complex. This evolving information environment can, at times, constrain the space for constructive dialogue, posing challenges for democratic processes and occasionally prompting more immediate or precautionary governance responses.

A parallel area of consideration is the evolving space for civic engagement and the safeguarding of fundamental rights, where the Government of Pakistan has taken a measured and responsive approach. In a context shaped by complex security dynamics and political contestation, regulatory and oversight mechanisms have been strengthened to address emerging challenges and ensure public safety. These measures are guided by the objective of maintaining stability, protecting citizens, and preserving national integrity. At the same time, there remains a clear commitment to upholding constitutional freedoms of expression, association, and access to information. The ongoing policy focus is on striking a prudent balance, ensuring that security interventions are proportionate, targeted, and supportive of Pakistan's long-term democratic resilience.

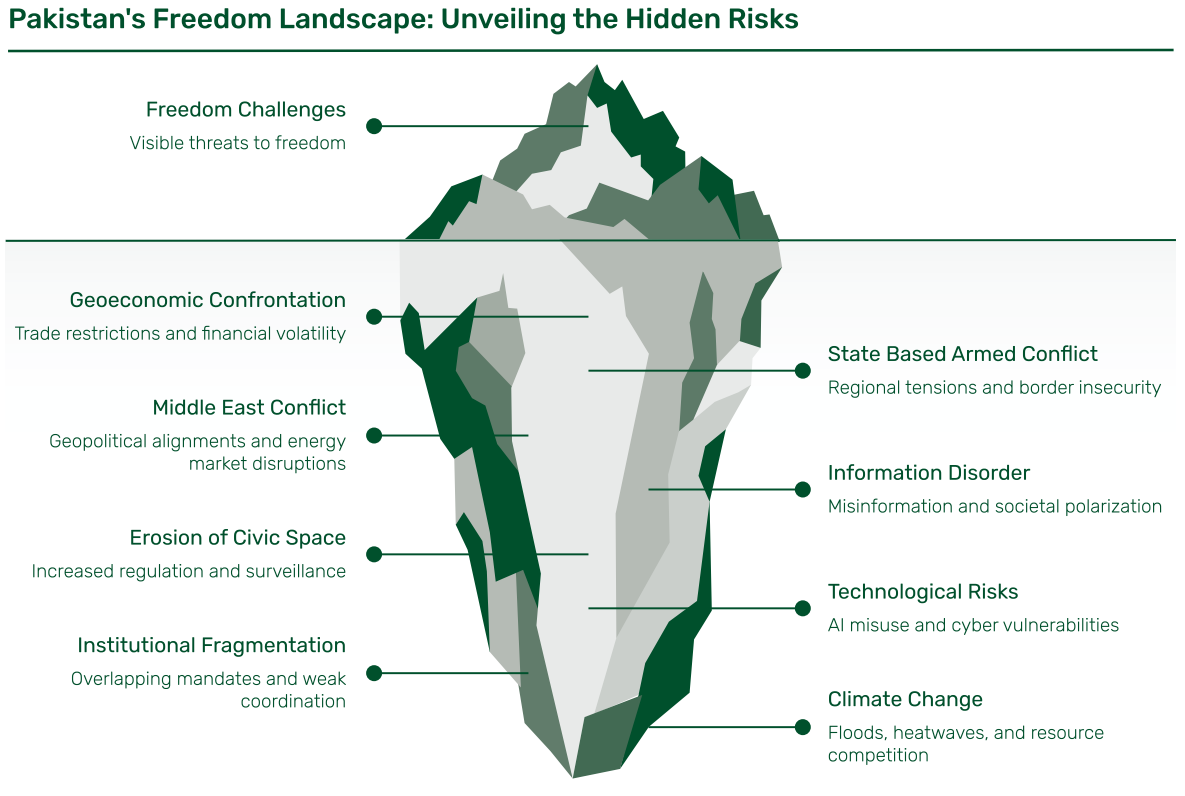


Figure : Pakistan's Freedom Landscape, the Hidden Risks, The Freedom Report 2026

Technological transformation introduces another layer of complexity. The integration of artificial intelligence, data systems, and digital governance tools offers opportunities for efficiency and innovation, but also carries significant risks. The misuse of AI in shaping public opinion, generating synthetic content, or influencing political outcomes can distort democratic processes. At the same time, cyber vulnerabilities expose critical infrastructure, financial systems, communication networks, and government platforms, to potential disruption. Without robust regulatory frameworks and institutional capacity, the pace of technological adoption may outstrip the ability to manage its consequences.

Economic, technological, and political dynamics present an increasingly complex governance landscape, which requires strong coordination across institutions. In recent years, efforts have been underway to streamline mandates and enhance inter-agency collaboration; however, given the scale and diversity of emerging challenges, further strengthening of coordination mechanisms remains an ongoing priority. Continued improvements in policy alignment and implementation consistency can enhance the state's responsiveness to evolving risks, while also supporting long-term planning and reform sustainability. As these institutional linkages mature, well-designed policies are more likely to translate into effective outcomes, reinforcing public confidence and strengthening overall governance systems.

Climate change continues to act as a powerful risk multiplier. Pakistan's exposure to floods, heatwaves, water scarcity, and agricultural disruption places additional strain on already stretched systems. Environmental shocks disproportionately affect vulnerable communities, exacerbating inequality and internal displacement. The intersection of climate stress with economic fragility and governance limitations creates a compounded risk environment where each shock amplifies the impact of others.

Taken together, these risks reflect a shift toward a more interconnected and layered threat landscape. Economic instability feeds political discontent; geopolitical tensions influence domestic policy choices; technological disruption accelerates societal polarization; and climate pressures intensify resource competition. The cumulative effect is a governance environment where maintaining and expanding freedoms becomes increasingly complex.

The way forward lies in transitioning from reactive governance to anticipatory and resilience-based policymaking. This requires strengthening institutional coordination, investing in data systems, protecting critical infrastructure, and embedding safeguards for civil liberties within security and regulatory frameworks. Pakistan's ability to navigate this evolving risk environment will depend not only on managing individual threats, but on recognizing their interconnected nature and responding with coherence, transparency, and long-term strategic vision.

12.1 Legislative Trends

The legislative landscape in Pakistan reflects an evolving attempt by the state to respond to emerging risks, technological shifts, and governance demands. However, the trajectory of lawmaking reveals a complex interplay between reform-oriented intent and control-oriented outcomes. In recent years, legislation has increasingly been shaped by considerations of security, digital regulation, economic stabilization, and institutional restructuring, often prioritizing immediacy over coherence.

A notable development is the continued evolution of regulatory frameworks in the digital domain. As digital platforms play an increasingly central role in political discourse, economic activity, and social interaction, the state has taken proactive steps to strengthen oversight through legislation addressing online content, cybercrime, and data governance. These measures are aimed at safeguarding citizens from misinformation, cyber threats, and harmful content, while ensuring a secure digital environment.

At the same time, given the rapidly changing nature of the digital ecosystem, there is an ongoing policy effort to further harmonize existing legal frameworks and enhance institutional clarity. Strengthening coordination and developing a more integrated digital governance architecture can help streamline mandates and reduce interpretive variations, thereby improving implementation effectiveness. Such continued refinement reflects a broader commitment to balancing innovation, security, and the protection of rights within an evolving digital landscape.

Alongside these developments, there has been a growing emphasis on security-oriented legislation in response to evolving internal and external challenges. In seeking to ensure national stability and public safety, laws and amendments have strengthened the capacity of enforcement agencies, enhanced surveillance capabilities, and introduced preventive mechanisms to address emerging risks.

At the same time, policymakers continue to recognize the importance of maintaining a careful balance between security imperatives and the protection of civil liberties. Ongoing institutional and legal refinements are aimed at ensuring that enhanced powers are exercised within clear frameworks of accountability,

proportionality, and oversight. This approach reflects a broader effort to integrate robust security measures into governance structures while upholding constitutional principles and sustaining public trust.

Another notable trend is the pragmatic use of ordinances and executive instruments to address time-sensitive policy needs. In a rapidly evolving governance environment, such mechanisms provide the state with the flexibility to respond swiftly to emerging challenges while ensuring continuity in decision-making. This approach often reflects both the urgency of reform initiatives and the complexities inherent in legislative processes.

At the same time, there is continued recognition of the central role of parliamentary deliberation in strengthening institutional checks and balances. Efforts to transition temporary measures into comprehensive legislation through inclusive debate and stakeholder consultation remain an important part of the governance process. Over time, this balance between responsiveness and deliberation can further reinforce the effectiveness of representative institutions while maintaining policy momentum.

Economic considerations have played an important role in shaping recent legislative priorities, with a strong focus on investment facilitation, taxation reforms, and regulatory simplification. Initiatives aimed at improving the ease of doing business, expanding digital finance, and attracting foreign investment reflect a broader commitment to economic recovery and long-term growth. As these reforms continue to evolve, there is an opportunity to further align them within a more integrated governance framework, ensuring that economic progress is complemented by inclusive and sustainable social outcomes.

In the social sector, legislative developments have demonstrated steady progress, particularly in areas such as gender rights, labor protections, and social welfare, with provinces playing an active role following devolution. Laws addressing critical issues, including gender-based violence, workplace harassment, and child protection, underscore the state's commitment to strengthening social safeguards. Ongoing efforts to enhance institutional capacity, resource allocation, and implementation mechanisms can further ensure that these legal provisions translate into tangible improvements on the ground.

An additional area of focus has been institutional strengthening through the creation of specialized bodies, authorities, and coordination mechanisms to address complex governance challenges. These initiatives are designed to improve efficiency, responsiveness, and sectoral expertise, particularly in areas such as investment facilitation and digital governance. As the institutional landscape expands, continued emphasis on clarity of roles, coordination, and accountability can help maximize effectiveness, reduce overlaps, and reinforce a more cohesive and transparent governance architecture.

Table 12.1: Key Institutions Enacted / Strengthened in Current Government Era

Institution Name	Enacted / Formalized Date	Enacted Mechanism	Purpose	Impact
Special Investment Facilitation Council (SIFC)	2023 (Operationalized 2024 onwards)	Executive Order + Institutional Framework	Fast-track foreign investment, particularly in energy, agriculture, mining, and IT sectors	Accelerated decision-making, questions on improved investor confidence; raised questions on institutional overlap and civilian oversight.
Pakistan Civil Aviation Authority (PCAA) – Post-Segregation Framework	2023–2024	Pakistan Civil Aviation Act, 2023	Separate regulatory and operational functions in aviation sector	Improved compliance with international aviation standards; enabled lifting of EU/UK flight bans
Pakistan Airports Authority (PAA)	2023–2024	Pakistan Airports Authority Act, 2023	Manage and operate airports independently from regulator	Enhanced operational efficiency and transparency in airport management
National Cyber Crime Investigation Agency (NCCIA)	2024	Administrative Reorganization under Interior Division	Dedicated body for cybercrime investigation, separate from FIA	Strengthened specialization in cyber enforcement to enhance digital security and improve cybercrime response capabilities.
Electric Vehicle Charging Infrastructure Framework (EVCS Authority Mechanism)	2024	S.R.O. 1646(I)/2024 + NEV Policy 2025–2030	Regulate and promote EV charging infrastructure and battery swapping systems	Encouraged EV ecosystem growth; early-stage implementation with regulatory clarity challenges
Central Power Purchasing Agency / Power Planning & Monitoring Company (PPMC Strengthening)	2024–2025	Policy and Institutional Strengthening under Power Division	Oversee DISCO reforms, energy planning (IGCEP, TSEP), and market operations	Improved planning and monitoring; still facing structural inefficiencies in distribution sector
National Energy Efficiency & Conservation Authority (NEECA – Expanded Regulatory Role)	2024	Energy Label Regulations + Policy Instruments	Implement Minimum Energy Performance Standards (MEPS) and labeling regime	Significant projected energy savings; improved regulatory oversight of appliances

Raast Payment System (State Bank of Pakistan)	Expanded 2024–2025	Central Bank Digital Infrastructure Initiative	Instant digital payments and financial inclusion	Rapid adoption in retail payments; foundational for digital economy expansion
Pakistan Digital Authority	2025	Legislation / Policy Proposal	Centralize digital governance, data regulation, and platform oversight	Potential to improve coordination and streamline Pakistan's digital regulatory framework through more unified institutional oversight.
Constitutional Court of Pakistan	2025	Constitutional Amendment (26th/27th Amendment context)	Dedicated adjudication of constitutional matters	Aimed at improving judicial efficiency, reducing case burden on the Supreme Court, and strengthening institutional effectiveness through clearer procedural mechanisms.
Central Electrification Registry (Conceptual Institutional Mechanism)	2025	Policy Initiative under Power Division	Create unified data system for electricity access and distribution	Potential to improve data-driven governance in energy sector
Special Technology Zones Authority (STZA – Expanded Role)	Strengthened 2024–2025	STZA Act (earlier) + Policy Expansion	Promote IT zones, startups, and tech exports	Attracted investment interest; implementation pace varies across zones
National Disaster Risk Financing Framework (NDRF Mechanism)	2024–2025	Policy Framework (Planning Commission + Finance Division)	Strengthen financial preparedness for climate shocks	Improved fiscal planning for disasters; limited on-ground institutionalization so far

Legislative trends also reveal a tension between federal and provincial jurisdictions. Following the 18th Amendment, provinces have gained greater autonomy in sectors such as health, education, and social protection. This has resulted in a diverse legislative landscape, with varying standards, capacities, and priorities across regions. While decentralization enables context-specific policymaking, it also creates disparities in rights realization and service delivery, particularly in areas requiring national coherence.

Importantly, the legislative process itself is increasingly influenced by data limitations and narrative pressures. In the absence of robust, real-time data systems, policymaking often relies on partial evidence or reactive responses to public and media narratives. This can lead to laws that address symptoms rather than root causes, or that prioritize visibility over effectiveness. Strengthening the evidence base for legislation remains critical for improving both design and implementation.

Taken together, Pakistan's legislative trends reflect a system in transition, one that is actively responding to new challenges but struggling to maintain balance between control and empowerment, speed and deliberation, innovation and accountability. The path forward requires a more integrated legislative approach that aligns security, economic growth, technological advancement, and fundamental freedoms within a coherent governance framework. Strengthening parliamentary processes, enhancing stakeholder engagement, and grounding legislation in evidence will be essential to ensure that laws serve as instruments of inclusion and resilience rather than constraint.

12.2 Security vs Freedom Balance

The relationship between security and freedom in Pakistan continues to evolve within a complex and dynamic environment shaped by emerging threats and governance priorities. As the state responds to internal security challenges, regional developments, and the rise of digital and hybrid risks, security considerations have understandably assumed a central role in policymaking. These efforts reflect the state's responsibility to ensure stability and protect citizens, while also highlighting the importance of maintaining a thoughtful balance with the preservation of fundamental freedoms.

In recent years, there has been a growing integration of security perspectives across multiple sectors, including media, digital platforms, academia, and civil society. This approach aligns with broader global practices, where governments adapt to uncertainty through precautionary and risk-sensitive policy frameworks. In Pakistan's context, this evolving approach is accompanied by continued efforts to strengthen institutional checks, enhance policy clarity, and ensure that governance responses remain proportionate and aligned with constitutional principles.

The digital domain illustrates this balance most prominently. The state has taken proactive steps to enhance its capacity to monitor and regulate online spaces, addressing challenges such as misinformation, extremism, and cyber threats. As these frameworks continue to develop, there is an opportunity to further strengthen legal clarity, independent oversight, and accountability mechanisms. This can help ensure that regulatory measures remain targeted and effective, while also supporting innovation and constructive public discourse.

A similar dynamic is visible within the media landscape, where responsible reporting on sensitive national issues is increasingly emphasized. Efforts to promote professionalism, ethical standards, and national

cohesion are central to this approach. At the same time, ongoing initiatives to strengthen journalist protections and institutional support can further reinforce a balanced media environment that encourages both responsibility and openness.

Within civil society, regulatory frameworks have been refined to enhance transparency, accountability, and alignment with national priorities. While these mechanisms are designed to ensure responsible operations, continued improvements in procedural clarity and facilitation can help create an enabling environment that supports civic engagement and grassroots participation.

The judicial system remains a key pillar in maintaining this balance, with courts playing an important role in interpreting laws and safeguarding constitutional rights. As governance becomes more complex, ongoing efforts to strengthen judicial capacity, streamline legal processes, and ensure consistency in adjudication contribute to a more resilient institutional framework.

Advancements in technology have also enhanced the state's ability to improve security outcomes through data-driven tools and surveillance capabilities. As these tools are further integrated, the development of comprehensive data protection frameworks and safeguards can help ensure that privacy considerations are appropriately addressed alongside security objectives.

Regional and geopolitical dynamics continue to influence governance priorities, often necessitating timely and decisive responses. In such contexts, Pakistan has demonstrated a capacity to adapt its policy approaches while maintaining a long-term focus on institutional stability. Ensuring that such measures remain proportionate, time-bound, and subject to review will further strengthen governance outcomes.

Importantly, the relationship between security and freedom is best understood as complementary rather than competing. Pakistan's policy trajectory increasingly reflects an effort to embed this balance within its governance structures, strengthening security while upholding constitutional values. Continued emphasis on transparency, accountability, and institutional coordination will be key to reinforcing public trust and sustaining democratic resilience.

Ultimately, the effectiveness of governance lies not only in managing risks, but in doing so in a manner that protects and reinforces the freedoms that form the foundation of the state's constitutional framework.

12.3 Technological Disruption

Technological disruption is reshaping governance, economic participation, and access to services in Pakistan, with direct implications for how freedoms are exercised and experienced. The expansion of digital infrastructure, financial technologies, and e-governance systems has improved efficiency and widened access, particularly in areas such as payments, service delivery, and entrepreneurship. For many citizens, especially youth and small businesses, technology has become a pathway to economic mobility, inclusion and freedom.

However, this transformation is unfolding faster than the development of coherent institutional and regulatory structures. The governance of digital systems remains dispersed across multiple bodies, resulting in fragmented oversight and policy inconsistency. Rather than being guided by a unified long-term framework, technological regulation often evolves incrementally, responding to immediate challenges instead of anticipating structural shifts.

A key area of disruption is the increasing role of advanced technologies in shaping information ecosystems and decision-making processes. The ability to generate, amplify, and target content at scale has altered how public opinion is formed and influenced. This has implications not only for political stability but also for trust in institutions and the credibility of information. As digital platforms become central to communication, the absence of clear accountability standards for automated systems and algorithmic processes creates governance gaps.

Cyber resilience is another emerging concern. As reliance on digital systems grows, so does exposure to systemic risks affecting financial networks, public infrastructure, and communication channels. The capacity to safeguard these systems is still evolving, with coordination challenges across institutions limiting preparedness and response effectiveness. Strengthening resilience requires not only technical capability but also institutional alignment and clear protocols.

Data governance remains an underdeveloped area within Pakistan's technological landscape. The increasing generation and use of personal and transactional data is not yet matched by a comprehensive legal framework that defines rights, responsibilities, and safeguards. This creates uncertainty for both users and service providers, and raises broader questions about trust, accountability, and the ethical use of data.

Technological change is also altering economic structures. Digital platforms and remote work models have

expanded income-generating opportunities, particularly within the informal and freelance sectors. At the same time, these shifts introduce new challenges related to job security, skill adaptation, and regulatory coverage. The absence of formal protections for many participants in the digital economy highlights the need for updated policy approaches that reflect changing labor dynamics.

Disparities in access to technology continue to shape unequal outcomes. Differences in connectivity, affordability, and digital literacy limit the extent to which all segments of society can benefit from technological progress. Without targeted interventions, these gaps risk reinforcing existing inequalities rather than reducing them.

At a broader level, technological disruption is increasingly linked to questions of economic competitiveness and strategic positioning. The ability to develop, regulate, and secure digital systems is becoming a key determinant of national resilience. For Pakistan, this requires balancing openness to innovation with the development of domestic capacity and governance frameworks that can sustain long-term growth.

Technological disruption, therefore, presents a dual reality. It offers opportunities to expand access, improve efficiency, and enable new forms of participation, while simultaneously introducing risks that can affect stability, equity, and trust. The outcome will depend on how effectively governance systems adapt, moving from reactive responses to structured, forward-looking approaches that integrate technology within a broader framework of inclusive and accountable development.

12.4 Climate Change and Resource Freedoms

Climate change is increasingly shaping the contours of freedom in Pakistan, not only as an environmental concern but as a structural determinant of access to resources, livelihoods, and human security. The frequency and intensity of climate-related events, particularly floods, heatwaves, and water stress, are redefining how citizens experience economic stability, mobility, and basic living conditions.

At its core, climate change affects resource freedoms, the ability of individuals and communities to access water, food, energy, and habitable environments. In Pakistan, these pressures are most visible in the agricultural sector, where shifting weather patterns, unpredictable rainfall, and rising temperatures disrupt crop cycles and reduce productivity. For rural populations dependent on agriculture, this translates into income instability, food insecurity, and increased vulnerability to poverty.

Water scarcity is emerging as a critical dimension of this challenge. Pakistan's dependence on a single river system, combined with population growth and inefficient water management, has intensified competition over water resources. Urban expansion and industrial demand further strain supply, creating disparities in access between regions and socio-economic groups. In many areas, water insecurity is no longer a seasonal issue but a persistent constraint on daily life, affecting health, sanitation, and economic activity.

Urban centers are also facing growing climate pressures. Rising temperatures, air pollution, and inadequate urban planning contribute to declining livability, particularly for low-income communities. Informal settlements are often the most exposed to environmental risks, lacking resilient infrastructure and access to essential services. Climate-induced migration from rural to urban areas adds further stress to already burdened city systems, creating new layers of inequality and resource competition.

Energy access represents another intersection between climate change and freedom. As demand for energy increases alongside economic and population growth, the transition toward more sustainable energy systems becomes both an environmental and economic necessity. However, affordability and reliability remain key concerns. Fluctuations in energy supply and pricing disproportionately affect households and small businesses, limiting economic participation and productivity.

Climate change also has implications for public health and human security. Heatwaves, waterborne diseases, and air quality degradation pose direct risks to well-being, particularly for vulnerable populations such as children, the elderly, and outdoor workers. These health impacts reduce individuals' capacity to work, learn, and participate fully in society, thereby constraining broader dimensions of freedom.

An important but often overlooked aspect is the impact of climate stress on social cohesion and local governance. Resource scarcity, particularly related to water and land, can intensify local disputes and exacerbate existing inequalities. In regions already facing governance challenges, climate pressures can strain institutional capacity and complicate service delivery. This creates a feedback loop where environmental stress weakens governance outcomes, which in turn reduces the effectiveness of climate response mechanisms.

Despite these challenges, climate change also presents an opportunity for restructuring development pathways. Investments in climate-resilient infrastructure, sustainable agriculture, water management

systems, and renewable energy can enhance long-term stability while expanding access to resources. However, this requires coordinated policy approaches, long-term planning, and alignment between federal and provincial strategies.

The governance of climate and resource freedoms ultimately depends on the ability to integrate environmental considerations into broader policy frameworks. This includes improving data systems for climate monitoring, strengthening institutional coordination, and ensuring that adaptation strategies are inclusive and equitable. Particular attention must be given to communities that are most exposed yet least equipped to respond.

In Pakistan's context, climate change is not a distant or abstract risk, it is a present and evolving constraint on how freedoms are realized across economic, social, and geographic dimensions. Addressing it requires moving beyond reactive disaster response toward proactive resilience-building, where access to essential resources is protected as a foundational element of human freedom.

12.5 Geopolitical Pressures

Pakistan's freedom landscape is increasingly shaped by external geopolitical dynamics that extend beyond traditional diplomacy into economic policy, security frameworks, and domestic governance choices. In a world defined by strategic competition and regional instability, geopolitical pressures are no longer peripheral, they directly influence national priorities, institutional behavior, and the boundaries within which freedoms are exercised.

Pakistan's geographic position places it at the intersection of South Asia, Central Asia, the West Asia, and major global power corridors, making it both strategically relevant and structurally exposed. Engagements with key global actors, China, the United States, and Gulf economies, require a delicate balancing of economic opportunity and strategic alignment. These relationships influence trade flows, investment patterns, and policy direction, often narrowing the space for purely domestic decision-making.



The US vice-president, JD Vance, meets Pakistan's prime minister, Shehbaz Sharif, in Islamabad.
Photograph: Pakistan's prime minister's office

A defining feature of the current geopolitical moment is Pakistan's evolving diplomatic role as a mediator and stabilizing actor in regional conflicts. The recent high-level peace talks held in Islamabad between the United States and Iran mark a significant development in this regard.

These negotiations, described as the highest-level direct engagement between the two countries since 1979, positioned Pakistan at the center of global diplomacy. While the talks did not result in a final agreement, they represented a critical attempt to stabilize an ongoing regional conflict and prevent further escalation. Pakistan's role extended beyond hosting; it actively facilitated dialogue, coordinated ceasefire efforts, and engaged multiple stakeholders to sustain diplomatic momentum.



Pakistan's prime minister, Shehbaz Sharif (right), meets the Iranian parliament speaker, Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf.
Photograph: Pakistan's prime minister's office

This development signals an important shift: Pakistan is increasingly being recognized not just as a participant in regional dynamics, but as a convening power capable of influencing conflict resolution processes. The ability to bring adversaries to the negotiating table enhances Pakistan's diplomatic capital and strengthens its positioning in global governance conversations. At the same time, it also raises expectations and responsibilities, as mediation roles require sustained neutrality, strategic coherence, and institutional capacity.

However, geopolitical engagement also introduces complex trade-offs. Acting as a mediator in high-stakes conflicts exposes Pakistan to competing pressures from different global and regional actors. Balancing relationships with the United States, Iran, Gulf states, and China requires careful calibration to avoid strategic overextension or alignment risks. These dynamics can influence domestic policy choices, particularly in areas such as security, energy partnerships, and international cooperation.

Regional instability remains a persistent structural factor. Tensions along Pakistan's borders, combined with broader West Asia conflict dynamics, reinforce a security-sensitive environment. These conditions shape internal governance priorities, often elevating stability considerations and influencing regulatory approaches across sectors. The spillover effects of conflict, ranging from energy price volatility to security concerns, directly impact economic conditions and public welfare.

Geopolitical pressures are also increasingly visible in the economic domain. Global financial systems, international lending frameworks, and trade dependencies shape Pakistan's fiscal and policy space. Pakistan is being integrated into the West Asia bloc, instead of its traditional place in South Asia. External economic engagements, while necessary for stabilization and growth, often come with expectations that influence regulatory reforms, subsidy structures, and macroeconomic decisions. This creates a dynamic where domestic policy is partly shaped by external constraints.

Another emerging dimension is the strategic competition over connectivity and trade corridors. Pakistan's role in regional connectivity initiatives positions it as a potential hub for transit, logistics, and energy flows. While this presents opportunities for economic expansion, it also places Pakistan within broader geopolitical contestations over infrastructure, routes, and influence. The success of such initiatives depends on maintaining stability while navigating competing interests.

Geopolitical influence extends into the technology and digital space, where choices around infrastructure, partnerships, and standards increasingly reflect global alignments. Control over data, communication networks, and digital ecosystems has become a strategic consideration, linking technological development with national security and sovereignty.

At the societal level, geopolitical dynamics also shape national narratives and public perception. External conflicts, alliances, and diplomatic engagements influence media discourse and public opinion, often reinforcing polarization or shaping perceptions of national identity and global positioning. Managing these narratives becomes part of the broader governance challenge.

Despite these pressures, Pakistan's current trajectory also reflects an opportunity to redefine its global role. The Islamabad peace talks demonstrate the potential for Pakistan to transition from a reactive geopolitical actor to a proactive diplomatic stakeholder. This shift, if sustained, can enhance international credibility, attract investment, and strengthen strategic partnerships.

The key challenge lies in ensuring that geopolitical engagement supports, rather than constrains, domestic governance and freedoms. This requires a clear articulation of national priorities, institutional coordination, and a commitment to balancing external partnerships with internal accountability.

Geopolitics will continue to shape Pakistan's future. Its impact on freedom, however, will depend on how effectively the state leverages its strategic position, not only to navigate external pressures, but to strengthen internal resilience, institutional maturity, and its role as a responsible actor in an increasingly complex global order.



Chapter 13:

Policy Recommendations

The findings of the Freedom Report point to a consistent pattern: Pakistan possesses a reasonably developed legal and institutional framework, yet the gap between intent and implementation continues to constrain the realization of freedoms. This chapter outlines a forward-looking policy architecture designed to bridge that gap. The recommendations are structured across immediate corrective actions, medium-term institutional strengthening, and long-term systemic reforms. The objective is not only to improve Pakistan's performance on global indices but to enhance the lived experience of freedom for its citizens.

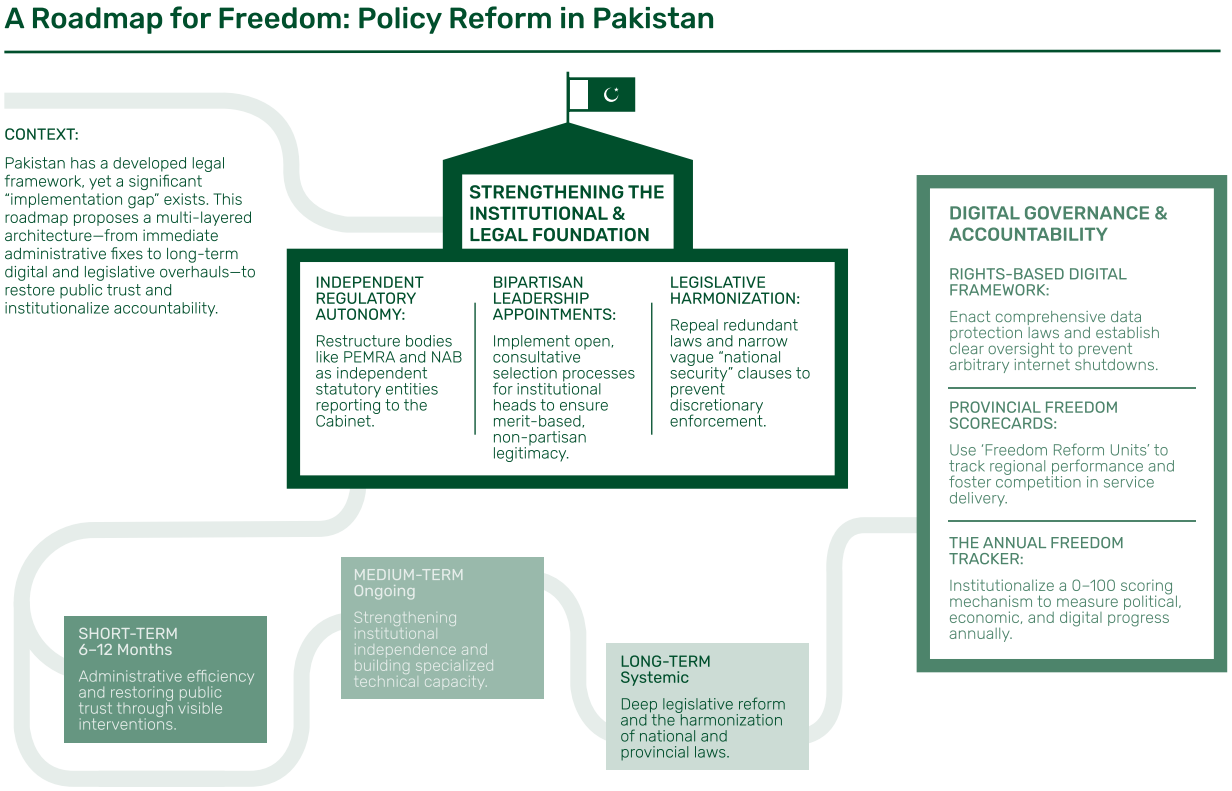


Figure : A Roadmap for Freedom: Policy Reforms in Pakistan, The Freedom Report 2026

13.1 Short-Term Corrective Measuresv

Short-term corrective measures are designed to deliver immediate impact within a 6-12 month timeframe. These actions focus on administrative efficiency, regulatory clarity, and restoring public trust through visible and measurable interventions.

A key area of focus is further strengthening regulatory clarity and consistency across sectors. Ministries and regulatory bodies have been progressively working toward issuing clearer, more accessible guidelines to support effective implementation, particularly in areas such as media regulation, digital governance, and civil society operations. Continued efforts to standardize interpretations and enhance transparency can further improve predictability, foster stakeholder confidence, and support a more enabling regulatory environment.

Another important priority is the ongoing refinement of enforcement practices. Law enforcement agencies are increasingly aligning their protocols with constitutional safeguards, with a growing emphasis on proportionality, due process, and professionalism. Expanding training programs and developing standardized operating procedures (SOPs) can further reinforce these efforts, ensuring consistency in application while maintaining public trust.

Judicial efficiency also remains a central pillar of governance reform. Measures aimed at streamlining case management, including fast-track mechanisms for matters related to civil liberties, media, and digital rights, are being considered to enhance timely access to justice. The introduction of specialized benches or dedicated courts for high-volume areas, such as cyber-related cases, represents a constructive step toward reducing backlogs and strengthening the overall effectiveness of the judicial system.

From an economic perspective, removing operational frictions is essential. Simplifying licensing procedures, reducing compliance burdens for small businesses, and ensuring uninterrupted digital connectivity can immediately improve economic freedom and investor confidence.

In parallel, the government should prioritize public communication and transparency. Publishing real-time dashboards on key governance indicators, such as service delivery timelines, complaint redressal rates, and regulatory decisions, can help rebuild institutional credibility. Transparency, even in constrained environments, signals intent and builds trust.

Finally, there is a need for targeted protection mechanisms for vulnerable groups, including journalists, human rights defenders, and minority communities. Establishing rapid response units or helplines, backed by legal and administrative support, can provide immediate safeguards against rights violations.

These short-term measures are not structural transformations, but they are critical signals. They demonstrate the state's commitment to aligning governance practices with constitutional freedoms, setting the stage for deeper institutional and legislative reforms.

13.2 Institutional Reforms

While short-term measures can stabilize the environment, the sustainability of freedom in Pakistan depends fundamentally on the strength, coherence, and independence of its institutions. Institutional reforms must therefore focus on reducing fragmentation, enhancing capacity, and embedding accountability across the governance architecture.

A central priority is institutional clarity and role definition. Overlapping mandates between ministries, regulators, and enforcement agencies, particularly in areas such as digital governance, media regulation, and internal security, create confusion and dilute accountability. A structured review aligned with the Rules of Business should clearly delineate responsibilities, establish coordination protocols, and reduce duplication. This is especially relevant in multi-agency domains where parallel jurisdictions often lead to inconsistent outcomes.

Equally important is strengthening regulatory independence. Regulatory bodies must operate with functional autonomy, insulated from undue political or administrative influence. This requires transparent appointment processes, fixed tenures for leadership, and clearly defined performance benchmarks. Independent regulators not only improve governance outcomes but also enhance investor confidence and international credibility.

This principle is particularly relevant when examining the institutional positioning of bodies such as the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) and the National Accountability Bureau (NAB). Both institutions function as autonomous statutory bodies established under their respective legal frameworks, while maintaining administrative reporting linkages with the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting and the Ministry of Law and Justice for coordination and oversight purposes. This arrangement is designed to facilitate institutional coordination, administrative support, and policy alignment while preserving the operational mandates and statutory responsibilities of the respective organizations.

To further strengthen institutional effectiveness and public confidence, continued efforts may be directed toward enhancing the operational autonomy, transparency, and governance frameworks of regulatory institutions through clearly defined oversight and coordination mechanisms. Strengthening institutional clarity and streamlined reporting structures can contribute to greater administrative efficiency, improved decision-making processes, and stronger public trust in regulatory governance while maintaining effective coordination with relevant state institutions.

Bringing these institutions under the direct supervisory framework of the Cabinet, with parliamentary oversight where applicable, would align Pakistan's governance model with international best practices, where regulators function as neutral arbiters rather than extensions of executive authority.

Capacity building within institutions remains a critical gap. Many public institutions operate with outdated skill sets, particularly in areas such as digital regulation, data governance, and emerging technologies. A structured national capacity development program, integrating training, international partnerships, and performance-linked incentives, can modernize institutional capabilities. This is essential for transitioning from reactive governance to anticipatory policymaking.

Another key reform area is data integration and institutional memory. Fragmented data systems across ministries limit evidence-based decision-making. Establishing interoperable data platforms, standardized reporting formats, and centralized repositories can significantly improve policy coherence. Institutions must evolve from siloed operations to a more integrated governance ecosystem where data informs both policy design and implementation monitoring.

A critical component of Pakistan's institutional governance framework is the legally defined and consultative appointment process for the leadership of major constitutional and statutory bodies, including the National Accountability Bureau and the Election Commission of Pakistan. Existing legal and constitutional provisions already incorporate mechanisms for consultation between the government and opposition in the appointment of key institutional leadership positions, reflecting the country's commitment to bipartisan participation, checks and balances, and institutional continuity. Such consultative processes are intended to strengthen transparency, enhance institutional legitimacy, reduce perceptions of politicization, and reinforce public confidence in the independence and credibility of national oversight and accountability institutions.

Accountability mechanisms also require strengthening. Internal audit systems, parliamentary oversight committees, and independent review bodies must be equipped with adequate resources, technical expertise, and enforcement authority. The role of institutions such as the Auditor General and Public Accounts

Committees should be further enhanced to ensure that governance is not only efficient but also transparent and answerable. Strengthened oversight, combined with independent regulatory structures, would create a governance ecosystem where power is balanced by responsibility and institutional performance is continuously scrutinized.

Together, these reforms would move Pakistan toward a more credible, transparent, and accountable institutional framework, one where regulatory bodies function with independence, leadership appointments are merit-based and bipartisan, and oversight mechanisms ensure sustained integrity in governance.

At the sub-national level, the absence or inconsistency of local government systems remains a structural weakness. Effective decentralization is essential for participatory governance and service delivery. Institutionalizing local governments with clear fiscal, administrative, and political authority can significantly improve citizen engagement and responsiveness. Without empowered local institutions, freedom remains distant from everyday governance.

Finally, there is a need to promote a culture of institutional coordination rather than competition. Mechanisms such as inter-ministerial task forces, joint policy platforms, and shared performance indicators can align institutional objectives. This is particularly important for cross-cutting issues such as climate change, digital transformation, and economic reform, where isolated institutional efforts are insufficient.

Institutional reform is inherently complex and gradual, but it is the foundation upon which all other freedoms rest. Without capable, coherent, and accountable institutions, even the most progressive laws and policies risk remaining ineffective in practice.

13.3 Legislative Improvements

Legislative reform is central to translating constitutional guarantees into enforceable and practical freedoms. While Pakistan's legal framework contains many progressive provisions, gaps in clarity, overlap between laws, and inconsistencies in implementation continue to constrain their effectiveness. The objective of legislative improvements, therefore, is not merely to introduce new laws, but to refine, harmonize, and modernize the existing legal architecture.

A key priority is legal harmonization and coherence. Multiple laws governing similar domains, particularly in areas such as digital regulation, media, national security, and civil society, often create ambiguity and conflicting interpretations. A comprehensive legislative review should be undertaken to identify overlaps, repeal redundant provisions, and align laws with constitutional protections. This will reduce discretionary enforcement and improve legal predictability for citizens and institutions alike.

Another critical area is the narrowing and precise definition of legal provisions that impact fundamental freedoms. Broad and vaguely worded clauses, especially those related to national security, public order, and digital content, can lead to expansive interpretations. Legislative drafting must ensure that such provisions are clearly defined, proportionate, and aligned with international human rights standards. This is particularly relevant for laws governing cyberspace, where the balance between security and freedom remains delicate.

Further strengthening due process guarantees remains an important component of ongoing legal and institutional development. Continued efforts to embed clear procedural safeguards, such as the right to a fair hearing, access to legal representation, and protection against arbitrary actions, can enhance the effectiveness and credibility of the legal framework. Reinforcing these elements within legislation and practice helps ensure that constitutional protections are consistently upheld, contributing to greater public confidence and the rule of law.

There is also a need to institutionalize mandatory legislative impact assessments. Before the enactment of new laws, especially those affecting economic activity, media, or civil liberties, structured assessments should evaluate their potential impact on freedoms, investment climate, and governance efficiency. This would shift lawmaking from reactive responses to evidence-based policymaking.

In addition, sunset clauses and periodic review mechanisms should be introduced for sensitive legislation. Laws dealing with security, technology, or emergency powers must not remain static in a rapidly evolving environment. Built-in review timelines would allow Parliament to reassess their relevance, effectiveness, and potential unintended consequences.

Parliamentary processes themselves must also be strengthened. Enhanced committee systems, particularly within both the National Assembly and Senate, can improve the quality of legislative scrutiny. Committees should be empowered with research support, expert consultations, and public hearing mechanisms to ensure that laws are debated thoroughly before enactment.

Finally, there is a need to improve accessibility and public awareness of laws. Citizens often remain unaware of

their rights and obligations due to the complexity and inaccessibility of legal texts. Digitizing laws, simplifying language where possible, and ensuring public dissemination can bridge this gap between legislation and lived reality.

Legislative reform is not an isolated exercise, it is the bridge between policy intent and institutional action. By creating a legal framework that is clear, coherent, and rights-oriented, Pakistan can strengthen the foundation upon which all other dimensions of freedom depend.

13.4 Digital Governance Reforms

Digital governance has emerged as one of the most critical frontiers shaping the future of freedom. In Pakistan, the rapid expansion of digital platforms, fintech ecosystems, and online civic engagement has created new opportunities for inclusion, transparency, and economic growth. At the same time, it has introduced complex challenges related to regulation, privacy, surveillance, and information control. The policy direction must therefore strike a careful balance between innovation, security, and fundamental freedoms.

A foundational reform is the development of a coherent national digital governance framework. Currently, digital regulation is dispersed across multiple laws, institutions, and policies, leading to fragmentation and inconsistency. A unified framework should clearly define roles, responsibilities, and jurisdictional boundaries among institutions involved in digital governance, including regulators, enforcement agencies, and service providers. This would reduce overlaps and ensure more predictable regulatory outcomes.

A critical priority within this framework is data protection and privacy legislation. Pakistan must establish a comprehensive and enforceable data protection regime that safeguards citizens' personal information while enabling responsible data use for innovation and governance. Such a framework should include clear consent mechanisms, data localization guidelines where appropriate, independent oversight authorities, and strict penalties for misuse. Protecting digital rights is essential to building trust in the digital economy.

Equally important is the reform of cyber laws and content regulation mechanisms. Existing legal instruments must be reviewed to ensure that they are precise, proportionate, and aligned with constitutional protections. Overbroad provisions related to online content, misinformation, and cybercrime can inadvertently restrict freedom of expression and innovation. A rights-based approach to digital regulation, supported by transparent procedures and independent oversight, can mitigate these risks.

Ensuring reliable and equitable access to the internet has increasingly been recognized as a core economic and civic priority. The government has taken important steps to strengthen digital connectivity, expand broadband access, and support the growth of a resilient digital economy. In situations where connectivity measures are influenced by security considerations, efforts continue to focus on maintaining a careful balance between safeguarding national interests and minimizing disruption to economic and social activity.

Ongoing policy development is aimed at further enhancing clarity, oversight, and coordination in managing connectivity frameworks, ensuring that responses remain targeted, proportionate, and aligned with broader governance objectives. At the same time, sustained investments in broadband infrastructure, fiber networks, and efficient spectrum management, guided by long-term national connectivity strategies, are reinforcing Pakistan's digital transformation and positioning it for inclusive and sustainable growth.

The expansion of digital public infrastructure presents a significant opportunity. Platforms such as digital payments systems, e-governance portals, and identity frameworks can enhance service delivery, reduce corruption, and improve citizen-state interaction. However, these systems must be designed with principles of inclusivity, interoperability, and transparency to ensure that they do not exclude marginalized populations or create new forms of digital inequality.

Another key reform area is institutional capacity in digital governance. Policymakers, regulators, and enforcement agencies must be equipped with the technical expertise required to understand and regulate emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, blockchain, and cybersecurity systems. Establishing specialized digital policy units and fostering collaboration with academia and the private sector can strengthen this capacity.

Finally, accountability and oversight in the digital domain must be reinforced. Independent review mechanisms, judicial oversight, and parliamentary scrutiny should be integrated into digital governance structures to ensure that regulatory powers are exercised responsibly. Transparency in content moderation decisions, data usage, and enforcement actions is essential to maintaining public trust.

Digital governance is no longer a sectoral issue, it is a cross-cutting pillar of modern statecraft. The choices made today will determine whether digital transformation expands freedoms or constrains them. A balanced, rights-oriented, and innovation-friendly approach can position Pakistan as a forward-looking digital state

while safeguarding the freedoms of its citizens.

13.5 Provincial Action Plans

The realization of freedom in Pakistan is deeply influenced by provincial governance structures, service delivery mechanisms, and local institutional capacities. While federal frameworks provide direction, the lived experience of citizens is largely shaped at the provincial and local levels. Therefore, tailored Provincial Action Plans are essential to translate national policy intent into region-specific outcomes, reflecting the diversity of administrative, socio-economic, and cultural contexts across provinces and territories.

A key priority is the development of province-specific freedom scorecards. These scorecards should integrate both hard data (legislation, institutional performance, service delivery metrics) and perception data (citizen trust, access, and satisfaction as captured through surveys such as the TRUST Survey). By benchmarking provinces across standardized indicators, such as rule of law, service accessibility, digital access, gender inclusion, and economic opportunity, these scorecards can create a competitive yet collaborative environment for governance improvement.

To operationalize this, each province should establish a Freedom Reform Unit within its Planning & Development Department or Chief Minister's Office. These units would be responsible for aligning provincial policies with national freedom indicators, monitoring progress, and coordinating with federal bodies. They would also serve as focal points for data collection, reporting, and stakeholder engagement.

Another critical component is decentralized policy innovation. Provinces should be encouraged to pilot reforms tailored to their unique challenges, whether in policing, local governance, education, or digital service delivery. Successful models can then be scaled nationally. This approach not only fosters innovation but also ensures that reforms are grounded in local realities rather than centralized assumptions.

The strengthening of local government systems must be central to provincial action plans. Effective devolution, aligned with constitutional provisions, can significantly enhance citizen participation, accountability, and responsiveness. Provinces should ensure regular local government elections, fiscal decentralization, and administrative autonomy for local bodies, enabling governance to function closer to the citizen.

A further priority is inter-provincial coordination and knowledge sharing. Establishing platforms where provinces can share best practices, data insights, and reform outcomes can accelerate learning and reduce duplication of efforts. This could be facilitated through a federal-provincial coordination council or digital knowledge platforms, enabling the inter-provincial coordination ministry to be more effective and efficient.

In addition, provinces should adopt targeted inclusion strategies to address disparities within their jurisdictions. This includes focusing on underserved regions, rural populations, women, youth, and minority communities. Provincial policies must be designed to ensure equitable access to services, opportunities, and rights across all segments of society.

Finally, gamifying governance performance through public dashboards and rankings can create positive pressure for reform. Publishing comparative provincial rankings on freedom indicators, updated periodically, can enhance transparency, encourage competition, and engage citizens in governance discourse. When combined with incentives, such as performance-linked funding or recognition, this approach can significantly accelerate reform momentum.

Provincial Action Plans represent the bridge between national ambition and local reality. By empowering provinces with data, autonomy, and accountability, Pakistan can move toward a more inclusive and responsive governance model, one where freedom is experienced not just as a national ideal, but as a local and everyday reality.

13.6 Freedom Monitoring Mechanism

Sustaining progress on freedom requires more than policy intent, it demands a continuous, credible, and data-driven monitoring system. To institutionalize this, the report proposes the establishment of an Annual Freedom Tracker, a structured mechanism designed to measure, compare, and communicate the state of freedoms in Pakistan on a recurring basis.

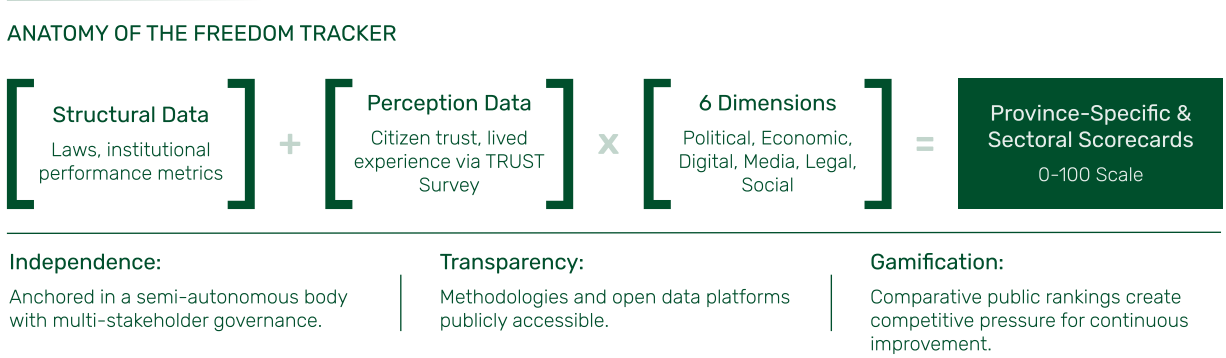
At its core, the Freedom Tracker should be built on a hybrid methodology, combining structural indicators (laws, institutional performance, policy implementation) with perception-based data (citizen trust, access, and lived experiences). This aligns with the broader methodology of the report, where documented evidence forms the foundation, supplemented by nationally representative surveys such as the TRUST Survey. Such triangulation ensures both credibility and contextual de pth.

The Tracker should adopt a standardized scoring framework (0–100 scale) across key dimensions of freedom,

political, economic, digital, media, legal, and social. Each dimension should be further disaggregated into measurable indicators, allowing for granular analysis. Importantly, the framework must allow for provincial, demographic, and urban-rural disaggregation, enabling targeted policy responses and highlighting intra-country disparities.

A defining feature of the mechanism should be the creation of annual provincial and sectoral scorecards. These scorecards would assess performance across provinces, ministries, and sectors such as media, academia, civil society, and business. By linking performance to clearly defined indicators, the Tracker can serve as both a diagnostic and a benchmarking tool, identifying gaps while also highlighting areas of progress.

Institutionalizing a continuous, data-driven monitoring mechanism to sustain reform



To ensure institutional ownership and credibility, the Freedom Tracker should be anchored within an independent or semi-autonomous body, supported by a multi-stakeholder governance structure. This could include representation from government, academia, civil society, and the private sector. Such a structure would safeguard neutrality while ensuring that the Tracker remains policy-relevant and actionable.

Data governance and transparency must be central to the mechanism. All methodologies, indicators, and data sources should be publicly available, allowing for scrutiny and replication. Where possible, open data platforms and digital dashboards should be developed to provide real-time or periodic updates, making the Tracker accessible not only to policymakers but also to researchers, media, and citizens.

The Tracker should also incorporate a policy feedback loop. Annual findings must be formally presented to Parliament, provincial assemblies, and relevant ministries, with clear recommendations linked to performance gaps. This would transform the Tracker from a reporting tool into an active instrument of governance reform.

Another critical component is international alignment. The framework should be designed to complement global indices, such as those measuring governance, competitiveness, and freedoms, while maintaining a strong domestic evidence base. This dual alignment would enable Pakistan to both improve its international standing and shape its narrative through credible, locally generated data.

Finally, the Freedom Tracker should evolve into a public accountability instrument. By publishing annual rankings, trends, and comparative insights, it can foster informed public discourse and encourage institutional performance. Over time, it can also serve as a foundation for incentive-based governance, where high-performing provinces or institutions are recognized and rewarded.

The establishment of an Annual Freedom Tracker is not merely a technical exercise, it is a strategic shift toward evidence-based governance, transparency, and sustained reform. By institutionalizing measurement, Pakistan can ensure that progress on freedom is not episodic, but continuous, measurable, and accountable.



Chapter 14:

Toward a More Open, Secure, and Prosperous Pakistan

The State of Freedom in Pakistan reflects a country at a critical inflection point, where institutional maturity, policy ambition, and societal expectations are converging in complex and often contradictory ways. The findings of this report highlight a fundamental reality: Pakistan is not lacking in frameworks, intent, or potential. Rather, the central challenge lies in translating structures into outcomes, and principles into lived experiences.

An open society is not defined solely by constitutional guarantees, but by the everyday ability of citizens to express, participate, access opportunities, and live without fear or exclusion. Pakistan's legal and institutional architecture provides a foundation for such openness, yet its realization remains uneven across sectors, regions, and demographics. Bridging this gap requires a shift from episodic reform to systemic consistency, where governance is predictable, rights are protected, and institutions function with clarity and accountability.

Security, often positioned in tension with freedom, must instead be reframed as its enabler. A secure Pakistan is not one where freedoms are constrained, but one where institutions are strong enough to protect both the state and the citizen simultaneously. The evolving regional and global environment, marked by geopolitical tensions, technological disruptions, and hybrid threats, demands a governance model that is both resilient and rights-conscious. The experience of recent regional engagements and Pakistan's emerging diplomatic positioning demonstrates that stability and openness can coexist, and in fact reinforce one another.

Prosperity, the third pillar of this framework, is deeply interconnected with both openness and security. Economic growth cannot be sustained in an environment of regulatory uncertainty, limited access, or constrained innovation. A thriving economy requires trust in institutions, predictability in policy, and inclusivity in opportunity. Pakistan's progress in areas such as digital payments, energy reforms, and institutional modernization indicates the direction of travel, but scaling these gains requires consistency, coordination, and long-term commitment.

A recurring theme throughout this report is the importance of institutions as the carriers of freedom. Laws, policies, and reforms derive their meaning only through institutional implementation. Strengthening these institutions, ensuring their independence, capacity, and accountability, is therefore central to Pakistan's future trajectory. Equally important is the role of data and measurement. Without credible, continuous, and transparent data, progress cannot be assessed, and narratives cannot be shaped. The proposed Freedom Tracker represents a step toward institutionalizing this culture of evidence-based governance.

The role of provinces and local governments further underscores that freedom is not an abstract national construct, but a localized and lived reality. Empowering sub-national entities, fostering competition through data-driven scorecards, and enabling citizen participation at the grassroots level are essential for making freedom tangible and inclusive.

At a broader level, Pakistan's journey toward openness, security, and prosperity is also a narrative challenge. In a global environment shaped by perceptions, indices, and comparative benchmarks, the ability to document, communicate, and align domestic progress with international standards is critical. Pakistan must not only reform, it must also articulate its reforms effectively, ensuring that its trajectory is understood both domestically and globally.

The path forward is neither linear nor without challenges. Trade-offs will persist, institutional resistance may emerge, and external pressures will continue to shape policy choices. However, the direction is clear. By aligning governance with constitutional values, strengthening institutions, embracing digital transformation responsibly, and grounding reforms in data and accountability, Pakistan can move toward a future where freedom is not aspirational, but foundational.

Ultimately, the vision of a more open, secure, and prosperous Pakistan is not a distant ideal, it is an achievable outcome. It requires sustained political will, institutional coherence, and collective ownership across government, private sector, civil society, and citizens. The foundation has been laid. The next phase must be defined by implementation, consistency, and trust.

In this transition lies Pakistan's opportunity, to not only improve its standing on global indices, but to redefine the lived experience of governance for its people, and position itself as a confident, capable, and forward-looking state in the global order.

Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Full Form
AI	Artificial Intelligence
AJK	Azad Jammu and Kashmir
BISP	Benazir Income Support Programme
CCI	Council of Common Interests
CDA	Capital Development Authority
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CPEC	China-Pakistan Economic Corridor
CRVS	Civil Registration and Vital Statistics
CSO	Civil Society Organization
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
DISCO	Distribution Company
DRAP	Drug Regulatory Authority of Pakistan
ECP	Election Commission of Pakistan
EOBI	Employees' Old-Age Benefits Institution
FIA	Federal Investigation Agency
FIA-CCW	Federal Investigation Agency – Cyber Crime Wing
FBR	Federal Board of Revenue
FRDI	Financial Reconstruction and Deposit Insurance
GB	Gilgit-Baltistan
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GGGI	Global Gender Gap Index
GSP+	Generalised Scheme of Preferences Plus
HEC	Higher Education Commission
HRCP	Human Rights Commission of Pakistan
ICT	Islamabad Capital Territory
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IoT	Internet of Things
KP	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa
LFS	Labour Force Survey
LFPR	Labour Force Participation Rate
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
NAB	National Accountability Bureau
NADRA	National Database and Registration Authority
NAP	National Action Plan
NCCIA	National Cyber Crime Investigation Agency
NCHR	National Commission on Human Rights
NCSW	National Commission on the Status of Women
NFC	National Finance Commission
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NITB	National Information Technology Board
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PAC	Public Accounts Committee
PBC	Pakistan Bar Council
PBS	Pakistan Bureau of Statistics
PECA	Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act
PEMRA	Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority
PITB	Punjab Information Technology Board
PMDC	Pakistan Medical and Dental Council
PMO	Prime Minister's Office

PPF	Pakistan Press Foundation
PPSC	Provincial Public Service Commission
PTA	Pakistan Telecommunication Authority
PTI	Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf
RAAST	Rapid Account-based Settlement System
RTI	Right to Information
SBP	State Bank of Pakistan
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SECP	Securities and Exchange Commission of Pakistan
SOE	State-Owned Enterprise
SUC	Services and Utilities Charges
SUPARCO	Space and Upper Atmosphere Research Commission
Tbps	Terabits per second
TI	Transparency International
TRUST	Transparency, Rule of Law, Understanding Systems and Trust
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UN Women	United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WEF	World Economic Forum
WHO	World Health Organization
WJP	World Justice Project

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The Freedom Report – Pakistan 2026 draws upon a wide range of primary and secondary sources to ensure evidence-based analysis, institutional credibility, and policy relevance. The report integrates constitutional provisions, legislative frameworks, institutional records, survey data, expert consultations, academic research, and international comparative indices to provide a comprehensive assessment of freedom across political, economic, social, governance, gender, and digital dimensions in Pakistan.

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- Pakistan Press Foundation (PPF) reports and media documentation
- Ministry of Climate Change and Environmental Coordination reports
- National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) reports
- Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP) reports
- Securities and Exchange Commission of Pakistan (SECP) publications
- National Information Technology Board (NITB) reports

3. International Indices and Comparative Reports

- Freedom House — Freedom in the World
- Freedom House — Freedom on the Net
- World Economic Forum (WEF) — Global Gender Gap Report
- World Economic Forum — Global Competitiveness Report
- World Economic Forum — Global Risks Report
- World Justice Project (WJP) — Rule of Law Index
- Transparency International (TI) — Corruption Perceptions Index
- United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) — Human Development Report
- UN Women — Gender Equality Reports
- World Bank — Worldwide Governance Indicators
- World Bank — Women, Business and the Law Report
- IMF Country Reports on Pakistan
- OECD Governance Indicators
- International Labour Organization (ILO) Labour Statistics
- UNESCO Education Monitoring Reports
- Reporters Without Borders — World Press Freedom Index
- Economist Intelligence Unit — Democracy Index
- Global Innovation Index
- Global Cybersecurity Index
- Environmental Performance Index
- Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) Global Reports

4. Civil Society and Independent Research Sources

- Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) annual reports
- Justice Project Pakistan reports
- Pakistan Institute of Legislative Development and Transparency (PILDAT)
- Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI)
- Pakistan Institute of Development Economics (PIDE)
- Centre for Peace and Development Initiatives (CPDI)
- Aurat Foundation reports
- Digital Rights Foundation reports
- Media Matters for Democracy publications
- Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI)
- Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS)
- Friedrich Ebert Stiftung governance reports
- International Crisis Group regional assessments
- Academic journals and peer-reviewed policy studies
- Research publications from Pakistani and international universities
- Governance and public policy think tank publications

5. Survey and Primary Research Data

- TRUST Survey (2026)
- Transparency, Rule of Law, Understanding Systems and Trust Survey
- Conducted by Mishal Pakistan as the primary perception-based dataset for the State of Freedom Report – Pakistan 2026.
- Survey Coverage
- 2,000 respondents across Pakistan
- Federal and Provincial Capitals
- Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK)
- Gilgit-Baltistan (GB)
- Urban and Rural respondents
- Gender-disaggregated responses
- Youth, business community, academia, media, and civil society stakeholders
- Survey Dimensions
- Institutional trust
- Rule of law perceptions
- Media freedom
- Economic opportunity
- Gender inclusion
- Digital rights and freedoms
- Public service delivery
- Corruption and transparency
- Citizen confidence in governance systems
- Perceptions regarding democratic participation and constitutional rights

6. Expert Consultations and Qualitative Interviews

- In-depth interviews with policy experts
- Consultations with academia and university leadership
- Media editors and journalists
- Civil society leaders
- Business community representatives
- Women leaders and gender experts
- Provincial governance specialists
- Former bureaucrats and public policy experts
- Legal and constitutional scholars
- International governance and development practitioners
- Technology, cybersecurity, and AI governance specialists

7. Internal Research and Analytical Frameworks

- Developed by Mishal Pakistan:
- Freedom Scoring Framework (0–100 Index Model)

- Institutional Effectiveness Scorecards
- Provincial Comparative Freedom Dashboard
- Urban vs Rural Freedom Indicators
- Gendered Freedom Measurement Framework
- Governance and Regulatory Effectiveness Assessment
- Legislative Trend Mapping Framework
- Institutional Trust Architecture Model
- Public Perception and Sentiment Mapping Tools
- Digital Governance and Cyber Freedom Assessment Matrix
- Media and Information Integrity Indicators
- AI-assisted analytical synthesis and trend analysis frameworks

8. Media, Digital, and Open-Source Sources

- National newspapers and archives
- International media monitoring platforms
- Television broadcast archives
- Digital journalism platforms
- Social media trend monitoring and public discourse analysis
- Open-source intelligence (OSINT) datasets
- Public institutional dashboards and official press releases
- Digital platform transparency reports
- Online governance and cybersecurity monitoring databases

The report also benefited from consultations with economists, governance practitioners, legal experts, academics, journalists, civil society organizations, business leaders, technologists, and policy specialists. Every effort was made to ensure that the findings remain balanced, evidence-based, policy-oriented, and reflective of Pakistan's evolving institutional, constitutional, and governance realities.