

# A year of protests



The right to peaceful assembly  
from 2021 to 2022

*An HRCP media monitoring report*

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## **The Right to Peaceful Assembly in 2021–22**

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Human Rights Commission of Pakistan

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# Introduction

*Every citizen shall have the right to assemble peacefully and without arms, subject to any reasonable restrictions imposed by law in the interest of public order.*

## *Article 16 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan 1973*

This study looks at the state of freedom of peaceful assembly in Pakistan from January 2021 to March 2022, through the lens of how these assemblies were covered in the media. The study relies on data collected by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) from January 2021 to March 2022.

HRCP gathers data on freedom of assembly by monitoring the print and digital media and then verifying details of assemblies reported on social media through either the print media or HRCP's own networks to determine indicators such as the type of assembly (rally, sit-in, online campaign, etc.), the intensity of media coverage, location, scale, background, demands, the legal framework for the assembly, the government's response and its legal basis, acts of violence, arrests and casualties.

Data was also collected from human rights activists and assembly participants through observation missions conducted by HRCP's staff and members at selected assemblies across the country. For assemblies in remote areas of the country, HRCP relied on news outlets such as the *Pamir Times* in Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) and *Voice of Balochistan* in Balochistan, or its regional teams based in those areas.

This study looks at how assemblies were covered by the country's media, breaking down the intensity of coverage given to assemblies in mainstream and regional outlets, as well as on social media. An assembly with high or very high intensity of media coverage meant that the assembly was frequently covered, mentioned and discussed on a wide variety of platforms for a significant period of time, while low or very low intensity of media coverage was accorded to those assemblies that were only reported by individual accounts on social media platforms, or at most in local newspapers, for a brief amount of time.

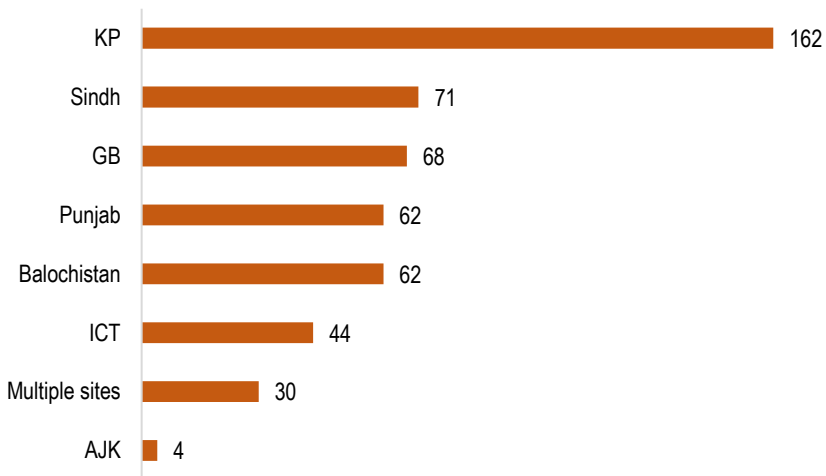
Each province or territory is treated separately to provide a localised view of the situation. An analysis of the trends that emerge attempts to answer the questions posited above: Are some parts of the country given better media coverage than others? Do some issues garner more attention? If so,

which ones and where? What might be the underlying reasons for the discrepancy? Does media coverage of assemblies across the country reify existing inequalities in Pakistan in terms of province-centre relations, and ethnic and gender discrimination?

## An Analysis of Assemblies in 2021–22

Between January 2021 to March 2022, 503 series of assemblies took place in Pakistan.<sup>1</sup> The highest number of series of assemblies, 162 in total, were recorded in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP). Sindh followed with 71, GB stood third with 68 series of assemblies (Figure 1). Punjab and Balochistan saw 62 series each. In the Islamabad Capital Territory (ICT), 44 series of assemblies took place. Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) reported only four series of assemblies. 30 series of assemblies took place in multiple provinces at the same time.

*Figure 1: Provincial breakdown of assemblies that took place between January 2021 and March 2022*



Thirteen protest themes were recorded during the period under review, of which the most frequent themes were related to justice, politics, administration, economy, education, health and gender (Table 1). Justice was a common theme for several demands and assemblies—mainly in cases of extra-judicial killings, enforced disappearances, police excesses and a breach of law and order. Assemblies held by political parties including the Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz (PML-N), Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf

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<sup>1</sup> If multiple assemblies on the same issue took place in different parts of the country at the same time, these were counted as one series of assembly, such as Pakistan’s Aurat March, which takes place concurrently in most major cities on International Women’s Day (8 March).

(PTI), Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (JUI-F), Jamaat-e-Islami (JI), Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP), Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) are grouped under the theme of politics. Assemblies against inflation, rising cost of living, low income and delay in salaries fall under the theme of economy.

*Table 1: Series of assemblies, by theme*

<b>Theme of assembly</b>	<b>Number of series of assemblies</b>
Justice	111
Politics	98
Economy	82
Administration	80
Education	50
Health	19
Gender	16
Ethnic demands	12
Religion	15
Social rights	6
Environment	6
Media	6
Terrorism	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>503</b>

Assemblies by students, especially medical students, were widespread, as per HRCP's media monitoring. The main reason for discontent among medical students was the introduction of the National Licensing Exam (NLE) as a compulsory condition, despite having passed all their university examinations. Student assemblies come under the theme of education. The annual Aurat Marches as well as the protests over Noor Mukadam's murder put gender on the protest map prominently. These themes overlap with others. For example, protests by the TLP against cartoons depicting the Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) in France, and the group's demands to expel the French ambassador from Pakistan, also fall under the theme of religious assemblies.

Assemblies by Baloch, Sindhis, Pashtuns and Hazaras can be clubbed under ethnic demands as much as under justice. The same goes for gender and justice. The demands for regularisation of temporary contracts, payment of dues and increase in salaries are also administrative in nature.





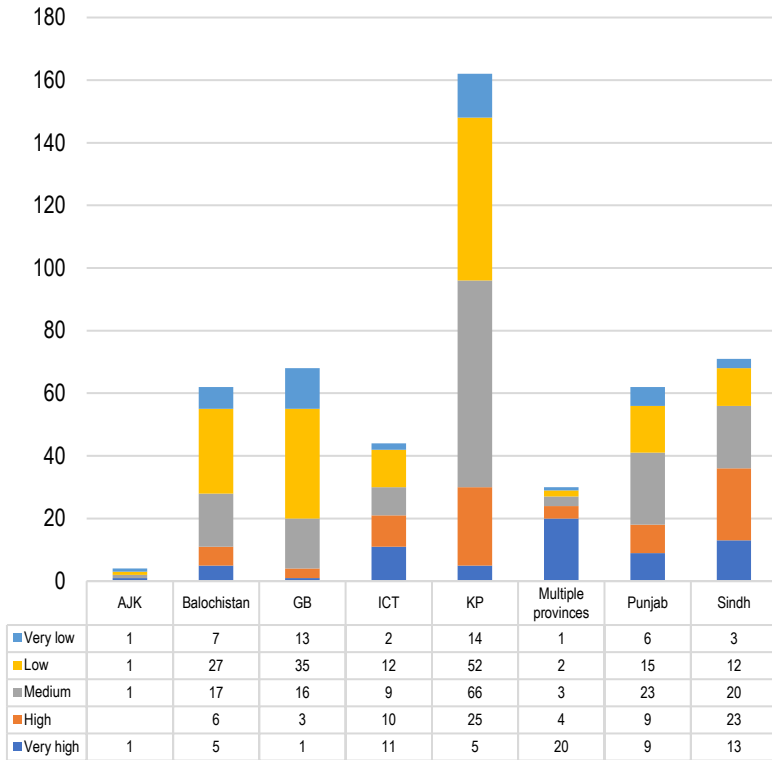
*HRCP's observation mission of the Haq Do Tehreek (Give Us Rights Movement) sit-in against illegal trawling in Gwadar, Balochistan, on 13 December 2021*

### Media coverage

An analysis of HRCP's data shows that a majority of assemblies across Pakistan received low to medium intensity coverage in the media (Figure 2). 156 series of assemblies received low coverage, whereas 155 received medium coverage. 80 series of assemblies got high coverage while 65 got very high coverage. Only 47 series of assemblies received very low coverage. Overall, medium to very high coverage was accorded to 299 series of assemblies, as opposed to the 203 that received low to very low coverage.

Unsurprisingly, the province of KP received the most coverage given that it witnessed the most agitation in Pakistan. Of the 162 series of assemblies recorded in the province, 66 were given medium coverage, 52 were given low coverage, five received very high coverage whereas 25 received high coverage. Only 14 series of assemblies received very low coverage. Overall, medium to very high coverage was accorded in the media to a majority of series of assemblies—96—as opposed to 66 that received low to very low coverage.

Figure 2: Intensity of media coverage of assemblies, January 2021 to March 2022



Sindh saw the second highest number of assemblies—a total of 71. Compared to KP, Sindh’s share of media coverage was qualitatively better, despite the numbers being half as many as those in the former. This could be attributed to the fact that Sindh has a lesser number of remote areas, and urban centres such as Karachi and Hyderabad have the strongest media presence in the country; for example, very high coverage was given to 13 series of assemblies in Sindh, the highest in all of Pakistan. High coverage was given to 23 series of assemblies, two short of KP, but double that of all the other regions. Low coverage was given to only 12 series of assemblies, 20 series of assemblies received medium coverage, while only three received very low coverage.

68 series of assemblies took place in GB, the third highest in the country. However, due to its distance from urban Pakistan, the quality of media coverage for GB was the lowest. A single series of assembly received very high coverage, the lowest in the country. Only three series of assemblies

were given high coverage, 16 received medium coverage, 35 received low coverage. 13 series of assemblies received very low coverage.

Punjab and Balochistan, Pakistan's largest provinces by population and by size respectively, saw 62 series of assemblies each. But the disparity in media coverage was stark, with Balochistan lingering behind in every category. Only six series of assemblies received high coverage, the second lowest after GB, and five received very high coverage, the same as KP. 27 series of assemblies were given low coverage, whereas 17 received medium coverage, and seven received very low coverage. In Punjab, on the other hand, there were nine series of assemblies with very high coverage, 23 with medium coverage, 15 received low and six very low. A relatively low number of assemblies for such a populous province may be surprising, indicating perhaps a lack of political organisation and awareness as is witnessed in the smaller provinces.



*HRCP's observation mission of the Kissan Ittehad (united farmers) march in Multan against increases in taxes on agricultural inputs on 14 February 2022*

44 series of assemblies took place in the federal capital, with 11 receiving very high coverage, second only to Sindh. 10 were given high coverage, third highest in the country. Nine received medium coverage, 12 low and two very low. Given the large concentration of media houses and journalists

in Islamabad, it is unsurprising that assemblies in the country's capital received widespread coverage in the press.

## The state's response

The state's response to assemblies across Pakistan can be divided into three broad categories: ignore, respond, suppress. Of the 503 series of assemblies, at least 273 (54% of the total) were ignored by the government. 80 assemblies, or 15%, received a positive response from the government and other concerned authorities. On the other hand, 61 assemblies saw violence, instigated mostly by the state—these instances make up 12% of the total number.

When an assembly is ignored, it means that the demonstrators did not receive any response from the concerned authorities. For the purpose of this study, an ignored protest is not one where the citizens' right to assemble was violated. As far as HRCP's data shows, these are the assemblies that took place which were not prevented from happening; the state simply did not respond to the demonstrators' demands. The information available to HRCP suggests that most of these assemblies were small in scale and generally received very little media attention. A significant number took place in areas outside major urban centres, such as GB, Sibi, Swat and Waziristan which featured prominently. The themes included, among others, protests against price hikes, public employees demanding salaries, protests against police brutality, and displeasure due to lawlessness.

It can be argued that the state could afford to ignore these assemblies, most likely because these assemblies were not large enough to be considered important to the state. In other cases, they were perhaps tolerated, such as numerous assemblies held by political parties such as the PTM, PDM, Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM) and the JI. In some cases, the assemblies did not threaten the core functions of the state and the demonstrators did not resort to violence.

On at least 80 occasions, the concerned authorities responded to the assemblies with negotiations. According to HRCP's data, the state's main response in these cases was always one of these four: (i) to directly negotiate with the demonstrators, (ii) to respond to their demands by taking concrete actions, (iii) to promise an inquiry and investigate, or (iv) to assure the citizens that their concerns will be heard. In several of the cases, the assemblies were successfully defused once the government paid attention to them or successfully created the illusion of such attention.

Over the course of the reporting period, at least two peaceful assemblies were such that they warranted government attention: the killings of 11 Hazara coal miners by the Islamic State at a Mach coalfield in Balochistan; the brutal murder of Noor Mukadam in Islamabad.

On 3 January 2021, gunmen belonging to the Islamic State kidnapped a group of Hazara coal miners—they were taken to the mountains nearby where six were shot on the spot and five succumbed to injuries on their way to the hospital. The attackers identified their targets based on their facial features before kidnapping them. The killings, the latest in a line against the minority ethno-religious group, provoked anger among the Pakistani Hazaras and Shias at large. Members of the Hazara community refused to bury the dead until the government held those responsible accountable for this atrocity. The demonstrators also asked the then Prime Minister Imran Khan to come to Quetta and listen to the mourners' demands. While Imran Khan condemned the killings, he refused to meet the bereaved and compounded their grief by accusing them of blackmailing him. The prime minister's remarks were severely condemned in several quarters, especially on social media. Despite Imran Khan's comments, the government did not stay indifferent to the Hazaras: Sheikh Rasheed, then country's interior minister, met with the demonstrators in Quetta and promised a compensation of Rs 2.5 million for each affected family.

Noor Mukadam's murder on 21 July 2021 resulted in widespread horror, shock, condemnation and calls to bring her killer Zahir Jaffer and others involved to justice. Apart from the sustained campaign on social media, people came out in every major city to protest her murder. Eventually, Zahir Jaffer was sentenced to death by a court in Islamabad and two of his accomplices were given ten-year jail sentences.

On the other hand, the annual Aurat March is an example of an event that cannot be ignored by the government due to the media attention, social media campaign and the backlash surrounding the country-wide event. During the period under study, the government provided security protocols to the march organisers, and several prominent figures, including Bilawal Bhutto, praised women for marching for their rights. During the march in 2021, doctored videos and photos emerged on social media to falsely paint the march as anti-Islam and blasphemous.

In response, the Minister for Science and Technology Fawad Chaudhry asked the Federal Investigation Agency to take the miscreants to task. However, the organisers reported significant delays and difficulties in receiving permission from their local administrations for their demonstration to take place. Moreover, in the 2022 demonstration in

Lahore, counter-demonstrators were allowed to march dangerously close to the Aurat March venue from where they hurled abuses and threats to the participants. Videos of the counter-demonstrators' actions were shared online which stoked enough panic that the organisers were compelled to end the demonstration early.

However, the rest of the cases where the government attempted to engage constructively with the demonstrators were localised issues. There are over 70 examples of such instances across the country according to HRCP's data, with notable examples from Balochistan, KP and GB.

In February 2021, for example, the body of the Awami National Party (ANP) leader Asad Khan Achakzai was found in Balochistan after he had gone missing months earlier. Achakzai was on his way to Quetta for a party meeting when he disappeared in September 2020. His bullet-riddled corpse was recovered in Killi Nosahar. The ANP staged protest rallies across the province, demanding that the perpetrators be arrested. After these protest rallies, the police arrested Israr Ahmed, a Levies Force official, who confessed to the murder and was found in possession of Achakzai's car.

Successfully negotiating as well as assuring demonstrators that their demands would be heard went a long way towards diffusing assemblies peacefully. Several cases of localised assemblies can be given as examples. For instance, in March 2021, the ICT police successfully negotiated with JUI-F activists to unblock the Murree Road following protests against the killing of a local leader belonging to the party. In the same month, the Peshawar police assured demonstrators in Bara that they would investigate the death of a tribal youth who died in police custody at the West Cantonment Police Station.

Also in March 2021, the Janikhel tribe ended its long protest after reaching an agreement with the KP government. The tribesmen had refused to bury the bodies of four youth who had allegedly been tortured and killed by the security forces. The agreement, signed between the provincial government and the Joint Qaumi (Afridi, Orakzai and Marwat) jirga and the Janikhel tribe elders, saw a payment of Rs 2.5 million to each affected family as compensation. A development package was also promised for the area and the government assured them of an investigation into the deaths.

In April 2021, in Lahore, students from KP's newly merged districts (NMDs) protested for over two weeks to demand the reinstatement of their scholarships at the Islamia University in Bahawalpur. Eventually, the protest was called off after a six-hour long negotiation between the students and the government officials, including the governor of the province. In

addition, the government announced that it would provide full scholarships annually to 1,000 students from the area, including 200 for girls, in universities across Punjab until 2027. In the same month in Narowal, employees of the food department ended their protest against the Narowal Assistant Commissioner Syeda Tahniyat Bukhari; the employees had refused to work with Ms Bukhari after a dispute and had demanded the government to assign a different person in her place. After negotiations, the government agreed to the demand.

Similarly, in June 2021, government school teachers held a protest in Karachi to demand an increase in their salaries. While the police prevented the teachers from reaching the Chief Minister's House, representatives from the protest met with the Chief Secretary who assured them that a committee would be formed to look into the possibility of a salary raise.

In Sindh, in July 2021, five security guards of the Sindh Engro Coal Mining Company were arrested by the police for the illegal detention and torture of a company worker Dodo Bheel which led to his death. Relatives of Dodo Bheel blocked the Thar Coal Road for over 15 hours before the local police registered a first information report (FIR) against the security guards. The provincial government established a fact-finding mission and announced a compensation of Rs 10 million to the victim's family. The investigation by the fact-finding mission concluded that the security guards had "misused their authority by illegally confining labourers in their own premises and developed a wrong image of running torture cells inside the company"<sup>2</sup>. It also added that the "local police were not only biased [against] the workers and the labourers, but that the senior officers were directly or indirectly aware of the torture and mistreatment of labourers by the private security staff"<sup>3</sup>. Lastly, the "district police officials were visibly seen trying to manage the whole incident to distract from [the] core issue of torture and illegal confinement of workers"<sup>4</sup>.

There are two main characteristics of the assemblies where the government is forced to negotiate with the protestors. First, an event is so egregious that the government cannot stay indifferent to it. In other words, some assemblies garner a level of media attention that cannot be ignored. Second, the assemblies that receive sympathetic government attention are extremely

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<sup>2</sup> Imtiaz Ali, 'Dodo Bheel murder: Fact-finding mission recommends replacing SSP, other officials over 'mismanagement'', *Dawn*, 10 August 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

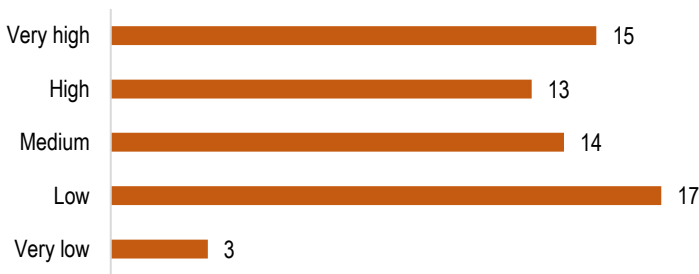
<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

localised. The government’s response to peaceful assemblies related to murder cases also stands out because they are taken more seriously.

### Restrictions and violence

As stated previously, HRCP recorded 59 instances where violence occurred in assemblies. A number of assemblies where violence occurred received medium to very low media coverage—30 instances—while other assemblies where violence occurred received very high to high media coverage—28 instances (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Intensity of media coverage of violence that occurred in assemblies from January 2021 to March 2022



There were instances where the demonstrators started the violence, such as the TLP. However, it is worth noting here that Article 16 of the Constitution only applies to peaceful assemblies, not assemblies that have a clear intention of becoming violent if their demands are not met, or if their demands are violent in nature. Otherwise, in a majority of cases, violence was initiated by the state.

In most cases, violence by the state occurred in conjunction with the use of certain provisions of the Pakistan Penal Code (PPC), which is the primary source of substantive criminal law in the country. HRCP has previously noted that “while initially promulgated by the British colonial administration, it was subsequently adopted by Pakistan after independence, and, barring some amendments, remains much the same to this day”<sup>5</sup> (14). According to HRCP’s data, the most common provisions invoked by the state to restrict peaceful assemblies were Sections 141, 144,

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<sup>5</sup> HRCP, *Freedom of Peaceful Assembly in Pakistan: A Legislative Review*, 2022.



145, 146, 150 and 151 of the PPC — these lay out the parameters of what constitutes an unlawful assembly.

There are a few salient examples where these laws, along with violence, were used by the state. HRCP’s data suggests that there were at least eight known occasions where peaceful assemblies were met with a combination of restrictive PPC laws and police violence.

In January 2021, University of Management and Technology students protested in Lahore against in-person exams during the coronavirus pandemic. In response, the police reportedly charged them with batons, took them into custody, and declared the assembly unlawful under articles 141,144, 150 and 151 of the PPC. Since the demonstrators were students, section 153B was also added to the charges.



*HRCP’s observation mission of a PTM rally in Tank, KP, on 13 December 2021*

In February 2021, the government clamped down heavily on government employees protesting for higher salaries in Islamabad. As thousands of demonstrators gathered at different locations across the capital, the police responded with arrests, tear gas shelling and firing rubber bullets — a total of 1,000 teargas shells were used to disperse the protestors, and around 1,500 to 2,000 demonstrators were also intercepted before they could enter the capital. The assemblies were declared unlawful under articles 144, 150 and 151 of the PPC. The same provisions were used against the Pashtun

Tahafuz Movement (PTM) in February 2021 in Peshawar to stop them from protesting in Peshawar, leading to mass arrests of PTM workers and multiple acts of violence. The same month, the killing of a man in Azam Warasak, North Waziristan, led to a protest in Wana Bazaar which the local administration tried to suppress by imposing a curfew, also under the same provisions.

In November 2021, the Association of Builders and Developers of Pakistan staged a protest in Karachi against the planned demolition of the residential complex Nasla Tower. The structure was found to have encroached upon public land and the Supreme Court of Pakistan deemed the construction illegal. The police and paramilitary forces baton-charged and tear gassed the demonstrators, and their gathering was declared unlawful under Section 144.

As stated earlier, there were also instances when violence was instigated by the demonstrators. For example, in March 2021, farmers in Lahore ransacked a government guest house in anger when negotiations with the Ravi Urban Development Authority turned sour. The government had wanted to acquire land for the Ravi Riverfront Urban Development Project for Rs 200,000 per acre in the river bed and Rs 235,000 per acre for the land alongside the river, but the affected farmers had opposed these rates as these were considered too low. In response to the farmers' violence, the police resorted to baton charge and booked the demonstrators under articles 144, 146, 147, 152, 382, 427, 506, 186, 147, and 149 of the PPC.

In October 2021, three police officers were killed and several were injured after clashes with the TLP in Lahore. According to the police, TLP workers hurled petrol bombs and stones at the officials. The police used tear gas after a police checkpoint was attacked — according to the TLP, at least 500 of its workers were injured as a result of the police response. Measures were taken in Rawalpindi and ICT to prevent TLP's long march in protest against the arrest of its leader Saad Rizvi in April of that year. These measures included roadblocks and increased police presence. Overall, the police preemptively arrested around 1,000 TLP workers in the lead up to the march. The government operated under PPC 144 on this occasion.

Sedition and treason laws, along with the Anti-Terrorism Act (ATA), were also used by the state on at least four occasions. In March 2021, Manzoor Pashteen and three of his activist colleagues were booked under PCC Articles 124-A and 153A, which deal with sedition and promoting enmity between different groups, after allegedly raising anti-Pakistan slogans in Mansehra. In January 2022, several activists belonging to the Sindhi nationalist Jeay Sindh Muttahida Mahaz and Jeay Sindh Students Federation

were booked for sedition as well as under the ATA. In July 2021, participants of a pro-Taliban rally in Peshawar were also booked under sedition laws and the ATA. In March 2021, treason charges were levelled against journalists for protesting the alleged extrajudicial killing of Irfan Jatoi in Sindh.

## Only violence

Given that instances of violence are more frequent than the use of violence in combination with PPC laws, it is pertinent to mention a few key examples. In March 2022, police in Quetta teargassed and baton-charged members of the Balochistan Employees and Workers Grand Alliance as they attempted to enter the city's Red Zone. The demonstrators had demanded an increase in salaries.

In March 2021, students protesting in-person exams faced tear gas and police batons at the Faizabad Interchange in Islamabad. According to press reports, the police also seized over 300 motorbikes belonging to the demonstrators. In the same month, teachers protesting in Peshawar against pay cuts were dealt with the same way to prevent them from reaching the provincial assembly building located in the Red Zone of the city.

In August 2021, around 12 medical students protesting against the NLE examinations faced batons and pepper sprays at Barkat Market in Lahore. The police took action when demonstrators tried to remove the barriers and disrupt the NLE examinations being held at a medical centre.

In July 2021, demonstrators belonging to the Attached Departments Officers Associations faced tear gas and water cannons in Peshawar. They were demanding an increase in pay in line with the recent government announcement. The demonstrators were headed to the provincial assembly building as they were intercepted by the police.

In September 2021, the police baton-charged demonstrators outside the offices of the Tarbela Dam in Haripur; according to press reports, the residents of Ghazi tehsil blocked the road leading to the offices to protest against the lack of jobs for the locals in the extension project for the dam.

In December 2021, a group of doctors and nurses faced the wrath of the state in Karachi as they took to the streets. Press reports suggest “the young doctors and nurses were protesting for the regularisation of their jobs as they were appointed by the provincial government to deal with Covid-19 pandemic and resolution of issues being faced by Karachi Metropolitan Corporation-run hospitals”. The demonstrators did not face any hindrance

when set off from the Karachi Press Club, but they were stopped by the police near the Arts Council when they tried to move towards the Chief Minister House, and were met with batons. Around two dozen demonstrators were briefly detained.

Where violence was used by the state, the assemblies were either large in size or the demonstrators crossed lines, such as entering a Red Zone or instigating violence. However, HRCP noted in its legislative review that even though the use of force against those entering Red Zones is legally sanctioned, it is not ethically justifiable in most cases where demonstrators tend to resort to such actions out of desperation to have their voice heard by the highest quarters<sup>6</sup> (104).



*HRCP's observation mission of a sit-in by Voice for Baloch Missing Persons in Islamabad on 9 December 2021*

It is also important to note that assemblies in big cities were met with violence more often. This upends the assumption that the Pakistani state is particularly violent in the periphery of the country — the state is violent wherever it is present.

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<sup>6</sup> HRCP, *Freedom of Peaceful Assembly in Pakistan: A Legislative Review*, 2022.

## Conclusion

In March 2021, the bullet-ridden bodies of four young boys—Ahmadullah, Mohammad Rahim, Razamullah, and Atifullah—were discovered in shallow graves in Bannu district's Janikhel area. The families and relatives of the boys, aged 13 to 17, alleged that they were tortured and killed by the security forces. They refused to bury the dead unless the government promised to take action against those responsible. For a week, they protested outside the Janikhel police station. When their demands were not satisfied, 10,000 tribesmen decided to march to Islamabad to press the government to respond. They were stopped using police barriers, and when the marchers tried to proceed nonetheless, they were met with tear gas and aerial firing. Manzoor Pashteen, the PTM chief, was detained before he could join the march. Eventually, after resisting for several hours, the police finally allowed them to proceed.

The tribe's efforts paid off when the KP government agreed to meet the demonstrators and hear their demands. According to the agreement signed between the two parties, the government promised to initiate a transparent inquiry into the deaths and punish the guilty. The affected families were given financial compensation. The government said that it would announce a special development package for the area, as well as ensure that Janikhel locals had access to the government in case of any need. The tribesmen ended their protest after signing the deal and finally buried the bodies.

This particular episode is one of many which contains lessons for the government on how to better handle assemblies that are rooted in legitimate demands. The Janikhel example shows that if the government's first response is to listen to the demonstrators, violence can be avoided. As highlighted previously, HRCP recorded at least 80 cases—70 of which were localised cases—where the state was able to diffuse the situation by being proactive and implementing the law. There were, in fact, more cases where the government negotiated and was sympathetic to the demonstrators than where it resorted to violence.

Based on this data, it can be concluded that urban centres enjoy better media coverage than the peripheries: Sindh, for instance, saw better coverage of its assemblies than KP, despite being far behind in the number of assemblies. This is due to the media presence in Karachi and Hyderabad which cities in KP cannot compete with. Assemblies in Lahore and ICT received a uniform quality of coverage, whereas GB lagged behind in every aspect. Coverage in AJK was extremely limited and provided a negligible number of insights for this study.

The privilege of receiving better coverage has its caveats—being in an urban centre makes demonstrators more prone to violence by the state. According to HRCP’s data, the highest amount of violence in assemblies took place in KP (15 times). However, the most striking statistic is that assemblies turned violent 11 times in ICT, the nation’s capital. For a small territory, this is a disproportionately large number. While TLP had its fair share of blame for violence, a factor that emphasises how Article 16 is only applicable to peaceful assemblies, in most cases it was the police that resorted to using force. The victims of police violence in ICT mainly included students and government employees. Quetta, Lahore and Karachi—the three biggest cities in their respective provinces—also saw similar trends.

The data challenges the conventional view that the Pakistani state is more violent against assemblies held by ethnic minorities and in the periphery. Instead, what the trends suggest is that the state is violent to peaceful assemblies wherever it is. It is worth mentioning that ethnonationalism has long been anathema to the Pakistani state and crackdown in nationalist groups has normally been carried out by the army or the paramilitary. The provincial police, which deals with the kinds of assemblies mentioned in this study, come under the purview of the police, and the police are under the provincial jurisdiction. As the data shows, police violence was directed mostly towards teachers, students and government employees, and an important chunk of it in Lahore and Islamabad. In fact, in smaller cities and localities, a majority of the assemblies were ignored by the government and the police.

Indifference is the main response of the government: out of the 503 series of assemblies, at least 273 were ignored by the government, making up 54% of the total. When the state did respond constructively to assemblies, it was only in 15% of the cases. In around 12% of the cases, the state responded with violence. This dismisses the notion that the Pakistani state is mostly violent to assemblies, and shows that it is actually indifferent to the qualms of its citizens, especially those living away from the centre. The Pakistani state is concerned chiefly about what happens at the centre. It responds either positively to assemblies or with violence – sometimes both at the same time – when events take place at the centre. Thus, the response to Noor Mukadam’s murder in Islamabad, the federal capital, or the lynching of the Sri Lankan national in Sialkot, an industrial hub. What is also common in these two cases is a) the outrage and b) that they were both murders. Thus, the state is compelled to respond when faced with pressure.

Second, the state does take the murder of citizens more seriously than other issues. It may be argued that the pressure by the Janikhel tribe after the alleged custodial deaths of four teens also forced the state to negotiate with the tribesmen. When the state resorts to violence, it is when the demonstrators come too close to the physical symbols of the state, such as the Red Zones where government buildings are located. This was routinely the case when demonstrators tried to enter Red Zones and the police responded by tear gas shelling, water cannons and baton charge. Once again, see an obsession with controlling the centre.

Going forward, these same trends are likely to recur unless there are fundamental changes in the way the state operates. With rising inflation and a lack of economic growth, assemblies around inflation and lack of financial security might happen more often. It is hard to see the state dealing with demonstrators in a different way. There could be more violence in the lead-up to the next elections as well.

The issues are two-fold; first, the state's distrust of its own citizens showcased by police behaviour towards demonstrators. Second, even if the state becomes more tolerant of assemblies, the underlying issues behind assemblies are still left unaddressed. Until now, the state has ignored the majority of the assemblies, but if public resentment increases, especially in the centre, it is likely that there will be more violence.