



# PUNJAB



## HIGHLIGHTS

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- Political and constitutional crises gripped Punjab as the provincial assembly became entangled in a power struggle between political parties and state institutions.
- In the absence of functional and effective provincial legislature, contentious political matters were frequently brought before the courts for resolution.
- Against the spirit of true democracy, the interim government persisted beyond the period prescribed by the Constitution.
- The caretaker government of Punjab resorted to repressive tactics against political workers of the PTI, conducting raids on the homes of senior party leaders and making arrests.
- The interim government frequently imposed Section 144 of the Code of Criminal Procedure, displaying its ill will to restrict political activities than to ensure peace and security in the province.
- The findings of the new digital census necessitated reallocation of national and provincial seats in the province.
- There was no respite from police encounters, with the primary targets being suspected ‘robbers’.
- The most egregious attack against the Christian minority happened in August with the setting on fire of churches and homes belonging to Christians in Jaranwala, resulting in loss of life and property. There were recurrent attacks on the worship places of the Ahmadiyya community throughout the year as well.
- The Lahore High Court ordered the elimination of forced child labour. The court also directed the Child Protection and Welfare Bureau to take appropriate measures against those who violate the law.
- The number of incidents of violence against women increased in 2023 compared to 2022.
- Rising inflation placed significant economic strain on farmers and labourers, prompting them to take to the streets in protest.
- A large number of people were affected by outbreaks of measles and dengue.
- Shortages of paramedics, nurses and anaesthetists marred the healthcare services provided by state-run hospitals.

- Punjab remained in the grip of smog as various districts, especially Lahore, struggled with dangerously high air quality levels.



## OVERVIEW

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The political divisiveness and polarization observed in the province of Punjab in 2022 continued well into 2023, the most evident outcome of which was that people's democratic rights were compromised during the year.

The failure of political parties to address their contentions through debate on the assembly floor, preferring court battles instead, led to the dissolution of the Punjab assembly on 12 January on the advice of the then chief minister.

A power struggle ensued among various institutions, including the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) and the president of Pakistan, regarding the date of the next elections.

The uncertain political situation prompted active adjudication by the courts, particularly concerning the provincial elections, leading the Supreme Court to rule on 4 April that the ECP was obligated to conduct elections within 90 days of the assembly's dissolution under Article 224(2) of the Constitution.

The arrest of Imran Khan in Islamabad on 9 May exacerbated the situation in Punjab. The rioting and arson carried out by PTI supporters on military and state installations, particularly in Lahore and Multan, but also in Rawalpindi, Sargodha, Faisalabad and Mianwali, were met with arrests of party leaders and political workers.



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The response of the state was understood as excessive given that the rioters, including many women, were charged under anti-terrorism acts and faced trials in anti-terrorism and military courts. This impacted the province's law and order, and the caretaker government failed to provide a level playing field for all political parties leading up to the national elections on 8 February 2024. The caretaker government in Punjab's tenure and mandate also extended beyond what was constitutionally provided.

State agencies failed to prevent faith-based crimes. The most egregious attack against the Christian minority happened in August with the setting on fire of churches and homes belonging to Christians in Jaranwala, resulting in significant loss of life and property. Other instances included the damaging of minarets at Ahmadiyya worship places in Wazirabad, sometimes with connivance of the administration, and incidents of mob lynching.

The year concluded without much improvement in the rights of women, children and transgender persons – incidents of gender-based violence increased in 2023 compared to 2022, as recorded by the Punjab Commission on the Status of Women; transgender persons persisted in their advocacy for the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act 2018; and violence against underage domestic workers also increased.

Uncontrollable inflation prompted workers to take to the streets, demanding revisions in salaries to cope with the escalated cost of living. Moreover, despite various environmental awareness campaigns, the government was unable to prevent deterioration in air quality across many districts in Punjab, particularly in Lahore.



## RULE OF LAW

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### Laws and law-making

**Legislation passed.** On 10 January, amid protests by the PML-N and PPP demanding that then Chief Minister Parvez Elahi should secure a trust vote before any other business of the assembly, as many as 21 bills were passed in the Punjab Assembly.<sup>1</sup> The bills predominantly pertained to the affairs of universities.

On 17 February, the government of Punjab notified the Punjab Home-Based Workers Act 2023. The act recognized home-based workers in Punjab as important stakeholders in the labour market, providing them with safeguards against exploitation and injustice. Though the act marked a landmark development, HRCP highlighted that certain definitions, such as ‘home’ and ‘disablement’, must be reviewed from a human rights perspective.<sup>2</sup>

**Interim set-up.** Following the dissolution of the Punjab Assembly, the ECP appointed Syed Mohsin Raza Naqvi as the interim chief minister.<sup>3</sup> The appointment, however, faced an unusual delay due to a disagreement between the Parvez Elahi government and Hamza Shehbaz-led opposition regarding the nominees. The matter was referred to the ECP in accordance with the Constitution. Under Article 224-A of the Constitution, the ECP decided to appoint Naqvi as the caretaker chief minister on 22 January for a 90-day interim period.<sup>4</sup>

The delay in holding the general election in Punjab prolonged Naqvi’s 90-day term as the caretaker chief minister; the caretaker set-up in Punjab continued, and hence, no more law-making could be done throughout the year.

### Administration of justice

**Pending cases.** According to the Law and Justice Commission Pakistan, the Lahore High Court (LHC) began the year with 179,425 pending cases. Through the course of 2023, it instituted 154,118 cases and disposed of 139,869 cases. By the end of the year, the LHC had 193,674 pending cases. Interestingly, the net increase in cases pending for adjudication in the last six months of the year was 5.7 percent for the LHC, a rate higher than pendency cases for the country’s other high courts.

Punjab’s district courts began the year with 1,317,770 pending cases; instituted 3,337,353 cases through 2023 and disposed of 3,287,237 cases. By the end of the year, Punjab’s district courts had 1,386,615 pending cases. Similar to the LHC’s pendency rate, the district judiciary of Punjab also witnessed a higher net increase in pendency than other provinces’ district judiciaries in the last six months of 2023 at 4.4 percent.

**Landmark rulings.** On 1 April, in response to a petition filed by a public interest litigation organization, the LHC halted the handover of 45,267 acres of land in Bhakkar, Khushab, and Sahiwal on a 20-year lease to the Pakistan Army for the purpose of corporate farming.<sup>5</sup> It maintained that a caretaker government did not have the power to make policy decisions of a permanent nature under the Elections Act 2017. Later, in July, the LHC suspended this order on intra-court appeals filed by the federal and the provincial governments.<sup>6</sup>

In another case, the LHC ruled in an order issued in August that caretakers of Ahmadiyya sites of worship cannot be held liable for the construction of minarets at sites that predate the law.<sup>7</sup> It held that Sections 298-B and C do not mandate razing or altering the structures built before their inclusion in the Pakistan Penal Code (PPC) through a 1984 ordinance. The structure in question was built in Wazirabad in 1922. In its fact-finding report, HRCP maintained that ‘the judgment should also serve to prevent the police from razing minarets at Ahmadiyya sites of worship—a constant pattern in the last eight months.’

**Death penalty awarded.** Numerous death penalties were handed down on charges of murder and blasphemy in 2023. For instance, a 22-year-old Christian boy was sentenced to death by the district and sessions court on charges of blasphemy under Section 295-C in Bahawalpur in May.<sup>8</sup> In several other cases, individuals were sentenced to death for rape. An additional sessions district and sessions judge handed down a death sentence to an accused in a rape case, besides imposing a fine of PKR 5 million in Muzaffargarh in June.<sup>9</sup> In another instance, a judge sentenced a man to death for raping his daughter in the Sialkot district.<sup>10</sup>



## ENFORCEMENT OF LAW

### Law and order

**Crime incidence.** According to police data, there was a significant uptick in crime in 2023 relative to 2022, with an increase in the number of registered cases of rape and gang-rape (Table 1). HRCP’s own data, based on media reports, also indicates that at least 296 police encounters took place during the year, as well as eight mob lynchings.

Table 1: Crime statistics for Punjab in 2023

Offense	Number of registered cases
Murder	4,847
Attempted murder	8,829
‘Honour’ killing	120
Rape	8,565
Hurt	18,611
Kidnapping/abduction	24,746
Gang rape	774
Acid crime	62
Dacoity	1,708
Robbery	101,032
Burglary	1,708
Theft u/s 382 PPC	3,840
Motor vehicle theft	116,917
Motor vehicle snatching	19,011
Cattle theft	21,751

Source: Punjab Police, in response to HRCP’s request for information

**Clampdown on PTI after mob violence.** After the arrest of Imran Khan from the court premises on 9 May, PTI-led mobs attacked state buildings in Lahore, Sargodha, Faisalabad, Mianwali, Rawalpindi and Multan, damaging and destroying state property. Security forces subsequently unleashed a crackdown on PTI leaders and workers.

Hundreds of them were arrested and their homes raided. Those arrested and, in many cases, rearrested in a series of charges filed against them, faced trial in anti-terrorism courts (ATCs) and military courts.



PTI activists faced a similar crackdown throughout the year. In one incident on 23 October, at least 80 PTI workers were held in a police raid in Lahore, allegedly in an attempt to prevent a party convention from taking place.<sup>11</sup>

Overall, PTI leaders and supporters were arrested on charges of inciting terrorism, arson and public disorder in Punjab after the 9 May riots. Senior leaders associated with the PTI that were arrested (and often rearrested) included the former Punjab Chief Minister Chaudhry Parvez Elahi, who was arrested by the Anti-Corruption Establishment and police in Lahore in June.

By September, he had been arrested 11 times.<sup>12</sup> Other prominent PTI leaders, including PTI president of the Punjab chapter Senator Ejaz Chaudhry and former Punjab governor, Omar Sarfaraz Cheema, were arrested in May.

One prominent case about illustrating the highhandedness of law enforcement authorities was the arrest of PTI supporter and fashion designer Khadija Shah. Shah was arrested in connection with the attacks on the Lahore corps commander's house and Askari Tower, and torching police vehicles near Rahat Bakery in Lahore's cantonment on 9 May.

Over the next few months, at least four more cases were filed against her in the anti-terrorism court. The court granted her bail on 15 November, but she was rearrested on 17 November under the Maintenance of Public Order (MPO) Ordinance for 30 days. She challenged her detention in the LHC as 'unlawful and unconstitutional'.<sup>13</sup>

On 11 December, the Punjab government submitted a notification in the LHC, stating that it had withdrawn her detention orders 'with immediate effect'. But before she could be released, the Quetta police filed a request in the ATC, seeking her transit remand.

The court accepted the request and granted the investigating officer her custody for two days, after which on 16 December, Shah was produced in the court and remanded in police custody for seven days. She was finally released by the ATC in Quetta for want of evidence on 28 December.<sup>14</sup>

**Police encounters.** There was no respite from police encounters during 2023. In one case in Kasur, the police claimed to have arrested two alleged robbers in injured conditions after an encounter on 15 March. But the police had claimed a shootout with the same suspects at another location and under different circumstances on 6 March, undermining their later claim.<sup>15</sup>

Another case that exposed the police's poor performance was reported from Toba Tek Singh, where the relatives of two robbery suspects, killed in an alleged encounter by Dolphin Force personnel, staged a protest demonstration on 28 May. They claimed that the victims were unarmed and had surrendered, yet the force had opened fire on them.<sup>16</sup>

## Jails and prisoners

**Prison capacity.** Data from the Punjab Prisons Department indicates that, as against a sanctioned capacity of 37,217 inmates, the province's 43 jails held 60,668 prisoners, implying overcrowding by at least 63 percent. Under-trial prisoners also outnumbered convicted prisoners at a ratio of 3 to 1. Table 2 gives additional data on the prison population in Punjab.

Table 2: Prisons data for Punjab in 2023

Total number of male inmates	59,652
Total number of female inmates	1,016
Total number of juvenile inmates	791
Total number of under-trial prisoners	44,113
Total number of convicted prisoners	14,862
Number of persons on death row	275

Source: Punjab Prisons Department, in response to HRCP's request for information

Of the 275 persons on death row, 210 were convicted on murder charges and six on blasphemy charges.

**Juvenile offenders.** According to Justice Project Pakistan, only 19 percent of juvenile inmates in Punjab were placed in borstal institutes or reformatory centres as of November 2023. This indicates a gap in implementing the Juvenile Justice Systems Act 2018 which aims to provide non-custodial measures for juvenile offenders.

**Prisoners' rights.** On 23 January, HRCP expressed concern over the situation in Central Jail in Gujrat, where prisoners protested for their rights. While the commission did not condone reported arson or violence perpetrated by the prisoners, it stood by the complete realization of their rights, stating that 'this is also a stark reminder of the subhuman prison conditions prevalent across Pakistan'.

## Enforced disappearances

The official data from the Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances (COIED) indicates that, since the COIED's inception in 2011, of the 1,625 cases received as of end-December 2023, 820 persons had returned home, 94 were traced to internment centres and 183 to prisons, while 72 dead bodies were located over the course of 11 years. 1,365 cases had also been disposed of over the course of the commission's tenure, of which includes 1,169 missing persons traced. At the end of the year, the COIED still had a balance of 260 cases of enforced disappearance from the province.



## FUNDAMENTAL FREEDOMS

### Freedom of thought, conscience and religion

**Mob violence in Jaranwala.** The year 2023 was marked by a watershed moment for minorities in Pakistan. An attack that gained worldwide attention was perpetrated on the Christian community in Jaranwala tehsil in Faisalabad district, where at least 24 churches, several dozen smaller chapels and scores of houses in 11 different localities of the town were torched and looted on 16 August. After believing rumours and allegations of blasphemy against a Christian man and encouraged by calls for action by Muslims from mosque loudspeakers, thousands of men gathered in the town and attacked Christian churches and houses in multiple locations.

An HRCP fact-finding mission found that the incident was a consequence of weakening rule of law, governance and social safety nets. It reported that the use of blasphemy allegations to perpetrate mob violence against religious minorities was 'a recurring phenomenon that exposed not only the poor capacity of the state to prevent loss of life and property, but also the absence of a sound policy for preventing religiously motivated crimes'.<sup>17</sup>



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**Ahmadi sites of worship.** Earlier, in April, miscreants attacked the Ahmadiyya community's worship place in Sargodha.<sup>18</sup> Acting on a complaint from Tehreek-i-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP), the police dismantled the minaret of the community's worship place in Burewala.<sup>19</sup> Again, in September, two more worship places of the minority community faced desecration by the police in Gujrat and Sheikhpura districts following a TLP complaint, which sought the removal of Islamic wording from the worship place.<sup>20</sup> Once again, in September, the minarets of three additional worship places were demolished in Sheikhpura district.<sup>21</sup> In a welcome move, the LHC barred the authorities from changing the structure of the Ahmadiyya places of worship in an order issued in August.<sup>22</sup> [See *Administration of justice*].

At least five first information reports (FIRs) were registered in Toba Tek Singh, Nankana Sahib, Faisalabad and Lahore against the Ahmadiyya community members for sacrificing animals on Eid-ul-Azha.<sup>23</sup> The complaints were registered under Section 298-C of the Pakistan Penal Code, which elaborates on the penalty for persons of the Ahmadi group calling themselves Muslims or preaching or propagating their faith.

**Hindu minority's rights.** At least 15 students belonging to the Hindu community were injured at the Punjab University when they were celebrating Holi with the permission of the administration in March.<sup>24</sup>

Members of the Sindh Council and Hindu students had organized the event. The event turned violent as armed members of the Islami Jamiati-Tulaba (the Jamaat-i-Islami's student wing) allegedly attacked the revellers. The misplaced priorities prevalent at higher education institutes were further highlighted in a letter written by the executive director of Higher Education Commission (HEC) to all vice chancellors, rectors and heads of universities. Dated 20 June, and without naming the Punjab University, it referred to the Holi incidents and stated the event 'caused concern and disadvantageously affected the country's image as Pakistan has an Islamic identity'.<sup>25</sup> The HEC withdrew the letter on 22 June after it triggered criticism across the country.<sup>26</sup>

**Christians in Sargodha.** An HRCP fact-finding mission reported escalation of threats of mob violence against the Christian community in the Sargodha district in July, leading to the community's socioeconomic ostracization, displacement of some residents, and a general sense of insecurity and fear.

The team found a series of FIRs were filed against the local Christians: the first two FIRs were lodged on 1 July and 8 July 2023 for allegedly posting blasphemous content online on two separate occasions.<sup>27</sup>

This was followed by the Maryam Town incident on 16 July, in which allegedly blasphemous wall chalking by members of the Christian community triggered angry mobs and created fears of mob violence.

Two more FIRs regarding the desecration of the Quran were lodged against unidentified individuals on 20 and 25 August 2023 in Sargodha. The entire community was being held liable for alleged crimes committed by certain individuals and receiving threats of mob ‘justice’.

**Cases of offenses against religion registered.** A Centre for Social Justice report found that 179 blasphemy cases were registered in Punjab during 2023.<sup>28</sup>

In terms of other violations of freedom of religion or belief, the report found that 29 Ahmadi communities and 113 Christian communities were attacked in the province, as well as six Ahmadis, 91 Christian homes, 23 Ahmadi sites of worship and 22 churches.

Twenty-eight alleged forced conversions also reportedly took place in 2023. Nineteen children were also among those arrested in Punjab on charges of blasphemy between January and mid-October, according to Sahil’s *Cruel Numbers* report.<sup>29</sup> Six of these 19 children were imprisoned while the others were acquitted.<sup>30</sup>

**People in jail on blasphemy charges.** Punjab leads in terms of the number of cases of blasphemy recorded across Pakistan by various institutions.<sup>31</sup> Table 3 provides data as of December 2023.

Of 552 prisoners jailed for blasphemy offences, 485 were under trial, 44 had been convicted and 23 were either ‘unconfirmed’ as condemned or on death row.

Prior to December, according to the ‘crime-wise’ population data for Punjab’s prisons, uploaded by the authorities, the total number of prisoners on blasphemy charges was 431 in August 2023.<sup>32</sup> This illustrates an increase of 121 (or 28 percent) in the space of one quarter.

*Table 3: Number of prisoners jailed for blasphemy offences in Punjab in 2023 under PPC Sections 295 A–C*

<i>Male (adult)</i>	<i>Male (juvenile)</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Total</i>
534	5	13	552
<i>Under trial (male)</i>	<i>Under trial (juvenile)</i>	<i>Under trial (female)</i>	
470	5	10	485
<i>Convicted (male)</i>	<i>Convicted (female)</i>		
43	1		44
<i>‘Unconfirmed’ condemned (male)</i>	<i>‘Unconfirmed’ condemned (female)</i>	<i>On death row (male)</i>	
17	2	4	23

Source: Punjab government, Prisons Department.

**Religious minorities' representation.** Earlier, in January, the Centre for Social Justice filed a petition in the LHC where it argued that the census in Pakistan recognizes Muslims, Christians, Hindus, Ahmadis, Scheduled Castes, Buddhists, Parsis, and Sikhs, while overlooking Bahais, Jews, Kalasha, atheists, Jains and other minority groups.<sup>33</sup>

Although on 18 January, the court issued a notice to the respondents, setting a response deadline for 9 February, the case was delisted and has not been scheduled for a hearing since then.

**First Hindu female assistant commissioner.** In a positive development, 27-year-old Sana Ramchand Gulwani, a woman from the Hindu community, assumed the role of assistant commissioner in Hassan Abdal in February. This marks the first instance of a female member from the Hindu community being appointed to such a position.<sup>34</sup>

## Freedom of expression

**Sedition laws.** In March, the LHC struck down Section 124-A of the PPC, which is about the offence of sedition, for being repugnant to the protection of fundamental rights.<sup>35</sup>

HRCF welcomed the decision, asserting that the provision is a remnant of an abusive colonial system which criminalized criticism of the federal and provincial governments as inciting disaffection or sedition.

Apparently the LHC decision was not considered valid in other provinces as PTI leader Ali Amin Gandapur was arrested under this law in Dera Ismail Khan in April.

The case of 124-A apart, there are many other speech-related offenses still existing on the statute books which the state uses against citizens in Punjab as well as other provinces, like the Anti-Terrorism Act, the National Security Act, Maintenance of Public Order and the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act.

**Forcibly disappeared.** In May, former TV news presenter and YouTuber Imran Riaz Khan was arrested from Sialkot airport.<sup>36</sup> Neither the police nor intelligence agencies took responsibility for his disappearance.

Ultimately, Khan's family approached the LHC to seek help in finding him. The court issued a warning to the police on 20 September to present the missing journalist on 26 September. Khan returned home on 25 September after remaining missing for four months.

Azhar Mashwani, PTI's focal person for digital media in Punjab, also went missing from outside his house on 23 March, reportedly for criticizing the Punjab police and the provincial government. He returned home after disappearing for a week.



## Freedom of assembly

**Overuse of bans on public assemblies.** The caretaker provincial government in Punjab showed no restraint in imposing Section 144 of the Code of Criminal Procedure all through the year, which grants officials the power to ban activities that may be considered against the public interest. The frequent exercise of this power displayed the ill will of the authorities to restrict political activities rather than to ensure peace and security for its people.

On 21 February, the Punjab government imposed Section 144 on the Mall, Gulberg Main Boulevard, and outside the Punjab Civil Secretariat in Lahore to prohibit all assemblies, sit-ins, and processions ahead of the PTI's Jail Bharo Tehreek ['court arrest' movement]. This prohibition was lifted on 10 March.<sup>37</sup> Again, on 9 May, Section 144 was notified across Punjab for two days, following public outrage and mob violence sparked by Imran Khan's arrest in Islamabad.<sup>38</sup> It was later extended by four days in the province. The section was notified again for the first 10 days of Muharram (between 20 and 29 July), and to control poor air quality levels in November.

**Arbitrary detentions and arrests.** The unrest post-Imran Khan's arrest led to the detention of numerous PTI workers in the province on charges of damaging state buildings and military installations.<sup>39</sup> Videos circulating on social media showed the arrest of PTI male and female workers in Lahore and Multan by the police.



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Closely afterwards, the government announced its decision to try civilians under the Pakistan Army Act 1952, a move that HRCP and various rights organizations took strong exception to.

In its statement on 31 May, HRCP asserted that such a decision would undermine civilian supremacy: 'while those responsible for the destruction of public and private property must undoubtedly be held accountable, there is ample provision in civilian laws for this'.<sup>40</sup>

Subsequently, all the civilians arrested remained in military custody under MPO laws, and families were not allowed to meet them unless the courts intervened. Subsequent crackdowns on PTI workers and leaders in Punjab, in the form of mass arrests and raids, further restricted the party's right to freedom of peaceful assembly. [See *Law and order*].

Political workers from other parties also faced curbs on their right to freedom of assembly. For instance, Ahsan Bhatti, a worker of the Haqooq-i-Khalq Party that actively protested against spiralling inflation, was arrested by the police in March for three days without formal charges.<sup>41</sup>

**Denial of permission to hold rallies.** In the lead-up to the Aurat March on International Women's Day (8 March), the deputy commissioner for Lahore refused to grant permission to the assembly organizers, citing concerns about potential clashes with the simultaneously organized 'Haya March' by the Jamaat-i-Islami women's wing.

In response, the Aurat March organizers filed a petition in the LHC, challenging the deputy commissioner's decision. However, just two days before the march, the Punjab caretaker government's information minister announced that the government would provide security to Aurat March participants on 8 March.<sup>42</sup>

Permission for the Aurat March was denied in Multan as well, but then a no objection certificate was eventually granted on 7 March, just a day before the event.

**Protests by government employees.** Government employees were seen on the streets of Punjab often in 2023, demonstrating against price hikes or changes in pension rules. Teachers, along with clerks, demanded the provincial government to not make changes to their leave encashment, gratuity and pension of public servants rules in Sahiwal in September.<sup>43</sup>

In Lahore, the police arrested more than 230 protesters of the All Government Employees Grand Alliance Punjab, many of them teachers, who were holding a sit-in outside the Civil Secretariat against the proposed privatization of public schools, amendments to pension regulations and end of leave encashment in October.<sup>44</sup>



## Freedom of movement

Post-9 May, hundreds of PTI supporters in Punjab faced travel restrictions as they were placed on the exit control list. On 24 May, the Lahore police requested the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) to include 746 PTI leaders and activists on the Provisional National Identification List, temporarily barring them from international travel.<sup>45</sup>

These individuals were reportedly wanted in 14 cases registered by the Lahore police under anti-terrorism and other charges. By 27 May, an additional 164 PTI leaders and activists were added to the no-fly list.<sup>46</sup>

In a parallel development in Rawalpindi on 25 May, the Rawalpindi district police forwarded names of 245 PTI workers and 74 others to the FIA for inclusion in the no-fly list.<sup>47</sup>



## DEMOCRATIC DEVELOPMENT

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### Political participation

Following the approval of results of the digital census 2023, the ECP decided to postpone general elections beyond the stipulated limit of 90 days in order to conduct a fresh delimitation of electoral constituencies. The new population figures did not change the provincial shares in national legislature, but differences in population growth rates within each province necessitated reallocation of national and provincial seats among the districts of each province.

The ECP published the final delimitation list of constituencies for national and provincial assemblies on 1 December. The stakeholders challenged the ECP notification on the delimitation. In all, 1,327 representations were filed for the national and provincial assembly constituencies – with a majority of them (675) coming from Punjab. The ECP decided all these cases speedily in 30 days. A number of parties approached higher courts challenging the ECP decisions, but the Supreme Court told the complainants that taking up these cases would only cause further delay in holding elections.

In the middle of this confusion about the elections date in Punjab, the rush to file nomination papers for seats in the Punjab assembly with returning officers continued for most part of the year. Once the 8 February general elections date was set, the ECP announced the elections schedule on 15 December. Thereafter, the commission started the process to file nomination papers for national as well as provincial assemblies' seats. Initially, it announced 20 December as the deadline for the filing of nomination papers with the returning officers, which was later extended to 24 December. A rigorous scrutiny of nomination papers then ensued between 24 and 30 December.

### Local governments

The year commenced with the expectation of local government elections slated for April 2023, following the conclusion of the previous local government's term on 1 January 2022. However, amid the political crisis, the local government elections remained a pipedream. The LHC set aside the appointment of local government administrators in Punjab, all new development projects initiated by them and the allocation of funds to the members of the national and provincial assemblies on 3 January.<sup>48</sup> In the 20-page judgment, the court observed that in an interim setup, till a newly-elected local government is constituted, the continuity of public services shall not include exercise of powers conferred upon the elected representatives particularly for identification, fixing of priority and expenditure of development funds.

To facilitate the local government elections in Punjab, the ECP issued a registration schedule on 28 May for electoral groups and panels. The ECP directed independent aspirants to organize themselves into electoral groups and panels, emphasizing that no independent candidate would be permitted to participate in the local government elections.<sup>49</sup>

## Shrinking spaces and role of assemblies

On 12 January, then Chief Minister Parvez Elahi recommended to Baligh Ur Rehman, the then governor of the province, the dissolution of the provincial assembly under Article 112(1) of the Constitution,<sup>50</sup> thus shortening the provincial assembly's term to only four years and five months instead of the constitutionally mandated five years (see timeline below). The province also got caught in a prolonged tussle involving the ECP, President Arif Alvi, and both the LHC and Supreme Court over the date of the next election.

### *Timeline of developments regarding the Punjab Assembly elections*

- 27 Jan: The PTI approached the LHC, seeking orders for the Punjab governor to immediately announce a date for early election in Punjab.
- 10 Feb: The LHC ruled that the ECP was bound to carry out elections within 90 days of the assembly's dissolution and it should issue the election schedule at the earliest.<sup>51</sup>
- 18 Feb: The LHC order was challenged by the ECP, holding that the interpretation of the court while 'applying the doctrine of penumbra to read the constitutional provisions is violation of the clear provisions of the Constitution'.<sup>52</sup> This meant that the deadline of holding elections would be 14 April in Punjab. But the Punjab Governor, instead of announcing the election date, advised the ECP to consult stakeholders to assess if the security and economic situations in the country were conducive for elections.<sup>53</sup>
- 20 Feb: After the chief election commissioner declined having a role in setting the election dates, President Alvi unilaterally announced 9 April as the date for holding general elections for the Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa assemblies.<sup>54</sup> The Supreme Court took a suo moto notice of the president's announcement to determine which government institution had the constitutional responsibility to decide the poll schedule.
- 1 Mar: The Supreme Court in a split 3-2 verdict ordered that since the Punjab governor had not signed the order declaring the dissolution of the assembly, the president had the constitutional responsibility to announce the election date in the province.<sup>55</sup>
- 3 Mar: The ECP wrote a letter to the president proposing dates between 30 April and 7 May for the elections. The same day,

bypassing the ECP's proposal, the president announced the next elections in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa would be held on 30 April.

- 14 Mar: The armed forces stated that they would not be available to provide security during the general elections of the Punjab assembly, claiming that the troops were preoccupied with maintaining security at the borders.<sup>56</sup>
- 22 Mar: The ECP further extended the date of the elections from 30 April to 8 October.<sup>57</sup>
- 4 Apr: The PTI filed an appeal in the Supreme Court, which ordered the government to hold polls in Punjab on 14 May, and that the ECP had exceeded its jurisdiction by delaying the Punjab election date. The Supreme Court then fixed 14 May as the new elections date and also directed the government to release PKR 21 billion for the elections in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and provide a security plan to the ECP regarding the polls. In subsequent reports submitted to the court, the ECP said that the government was reluctant in releasing the funds for its lack of feasibility in holding the exercise on one day.<sup>58</sup>
- 10 Apr: Resolutions calling for general elections across the country to be held on the same day were rushed through the joint sessions of parliament, the Senate and the Sindh and Balochistan assemblies. These resolutions hence rejected the Supreme Court verdict ordering polls in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa to be conducted within the constitutional provision of 90 days.<sup>59</sup>
- 8 May: The LHC dismissed a plea seeking the restoration of the Punjab assembly as non-maintainable.
- 9 Aug: President Arif Alvi dissolved the federal parliament on the advice of Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif – three days ahead of the parliament's five-year term, which expired on 12 August.
- 17 Aug: The ECP announced the schedule of the delimitation process to be carried out as per the new census approved by the CCI on 5 August. The ECP schedule showed that this exercise would take nearly four months, rendering it impossible for general elections to be held within 90 days of the dissolution of the provincial and national assemblies. This also violated its previous stated position that general polls would be held on the basis of the delimitation results published on 5 August 2022. Concerns also remained on the synchronization of electoral rolls with the new increased census blocks after delimitation.
- 3 Nov: The ECP, in pursuant of the order passed by the Supreme Court on 2 November, issued a notification that elections for the National Assembly and the provincial assemblies would be held on 8 February.<sup>60</sup>



## RIGHTS OF THE DISADVANTAGED

### Women

Violence against women was rampant, with women finding themselves unsafe in their homes, public spaces and workplaces. On 13 February 2023, bodies of a woman and her eight-year-old daughter were found in Faisalabad, allegedly in a case of ‘honour’ killing. On 2 October in Bahawalnagar, the police booked four men on charges of abduction, rape and the murder of a married woman.

**Gender-based violence.** Based on data collected by the Punjab Commission on the Status of Women, the number of incidents of gender-based violence reported through its helpline 1043 reportedly increased in 2023 (see Table 4).

Table 4: Gender-based violence reported by Punjab women’s helpline in 2023

Period	Family issues	Criminal offences	Property matters incl. inherited property	Harassment	Violence and torture, incl. domestic violence	Other general matters	Total calls
1 Jan–30 Nov 2023	1,324	713	1,289	5,230	5,655	8,257	24,909

Source: Punjab Commission on the Status of Women.

According to HRCP’s media monitoring, there were 166 ‘honour’ crimes in Punjab during 2023, with 100 female victims. The Digital Rights Foundation also reported receiving 1,724 complaints on their helpline during the year related to gender-based violence and cyber-harassment, mostly from women.

**Protective and redressal mechanisms.** The caretaker chief minister launched a safety app called Meri Awaz for women on 9 March to provide speedy assistance to women subjected to harassment.<sup>61</sup> After establishing the Women and Juvenile Facilitation Centre (WJFC) in Gujrat in 2019, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, in collaboration with the Punjab Police and with financial support from the government of Norway, inaugurated another facilitation centre in Gujranwala in January 2023. The WJFC is designed to assist women and juvenile victims of violence in reporting, recording, and investigating crimes.<sup>62</sup>

**Historical wins for gender representation.** On 26 February, the Lahore High Court Bar Association made history by electing Sabahat Rizvi as

secretary, a first in the association's history since its establishment in 1893. Rizvi garnered 4,310 votes in the 2023/24 bar elections, surpassing her two male rivals to secure the position of secretary of the bar. Rabbiya Bajwa also achieved victory by being elected as vice-president of the bar. She secured 3,590 votes, prevailing over five male rivals in the election.<sup>63</sup>

## Transgender persons

The police booked a transgender person on charges of leading prayers as imam for more than 18 months by hiding his gender in a village near Rawat. The case was registered under Section 419 of the PPC and the Punjab Vagrancy Ordinance 1958/59 against the accused in March.<sup>64</sup>

**Rollbacks on trans rights legislation.** The Federal Shariat Court ruled in May that Sections 2(f), 3 and 7 of the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act 2018 – that relate to gender identity, the right to self-perceived gender identity and the right of inheritance for transgender persons – do not conform with their interpretation of Islamic principles. The court deemed the sections to be 'un-Islamic'.

At a press conference held in Lahore on 13 July, community members stated that the court's decision was an unconscionable move against a marginalized community.<sup>65</sup>

It must also be noted that the Punjab Protection of Rights of Transgender Act 2022, which would extend the federal legislative framework governing the community's rights to the province, has yet to be passed. In its absence, provincial institutions and law enforcement remain disempowered from rectifying and redressing trans rights violations.

**Transport licenses for trans persons.** In a welcome development, transgender person Shahana Abbas Shani, a resident of Muzaffargarh, was issued a heavy transport vehicle license in September.<sup>66</sup> The next month in November, transgender persons were issued motorcycle and car licenses in Attock and motorcycle rickshaw licenses in Rajanpur to provide them easy access to workplaces.

## Children

**Unrealistic goals for school enrolment.** The year began with a ray of hope as the Punjab government set a goal of enrolling around 10 million children during the 2023 academic year. However, the Punjab Teachers Union considered the announcement unrealistic, pointing to deficiencies in classrooms, science laboratories, computers, drinking water, electricity supply and teachers.<sup>67</sup>

Their fears proved real as two months later, on 18 March 2023, a senior official of the Punjab School Education Department told The Express

Tribune that, based on a survey conducted in 36 districts of the province, only 500,000 children would be enrolled this year 'due to the limited capacity at their disposal'.<sup>68</sup>

**Push for children's rights.** In response to a petition advocating for the safeguarding of children's fundamental rights, including the right to life (Article 9), elimination of exploitation (Article 3), dignity (Article 14), equal protection of the law (Article 25), and education (Article 25-A), the LHC in February issued a directive to the Ministry of National Health Services Regulations and Coordination to provide an account of the measures taken to uphold children's rights in the country.<sup>69</sup>

The Punjab police signed a memorandum of understanding with the Social Welfare Department, the Child Protection Bureau, Search for Justice and Care Foundation whereby homeless children would be taken to child protection bodies and schools. The programme targets those children who are threatened by sexual and drug abuse and violence.<sup>70</sup> At a conference in February on child domestic labour in Punjab, organized by an NGO called Search for Justice, the National Commission for Human Rights, Punjab Child Protection and Welfare Bureau and other participants highlighted that the Punjab Domestic Workers Act, enacted in 2019, was unable to prevent child domestic labour, and that not even a single case had been registered against employers of children under the age of 15 as domestic workers in contravention of Section 3 of the law. Cases were filed against culprits only if there was evidence of violence against underage domestic help.<sup>71</sup>

**Torture of child domestic workers.** A case was filed in January against three suspects, among them two police officers, for torturing a 13-year-old girl in Lahore. The victim suffered 40 percent burn injuries.<sup>72</sup> A 13-year-old female domestic help faced torture and illegal detention by a female doctor. She was rescued from the residential quarters of the Mayo Hospital in Lahore.<sup>73</sup>

Two minor sisters employed as maids in a house in Faisalabad were recovered by a joint team of Child Protection and Welfare Bureau and police in a raid in May 2023.<sup>74</sup> In June, the LHC ordered the elimination of forced child labour. The court also directed the Child Protection and Welfare Bureau to take appropriate measures against those who violate the law.<sup>75</sup>

**Daycare centres in jails.** In January, the Punjab Inspector General of Prisons directed jail officials to provide daycare centres for children living with their imprisoned mothers in jails across Punjab. The facility would also be available for the children of women officials posted in female wards.<sup>76</sup>

**Child sexual abuse.** A report compiled by the Punjab home department made harrowing revelations about incidents of sexual violence against



children in Punjab. According to the study, of the total number of perpetrators facing trial for abuse, 55 percent were neighbours of the victims, while 32 percent were strangers. During the first five and a half months of 2023, some 1,400 children were reportedly abused in Punjab, 69 percent of them boys.

The report admits that many cases may be unreported as ‘cultural taboos make it difficult to report the crime’. Gujranwala topped the list with 220 cases, followed by Dera Ghazi Khan and Faisalabad. Sahil’s *Cruel Numbers* report also indicates that 75 percent of the 4,213 total reported cases of child sexual abuse during the year 2023 came from Punjab. Moreover, 83 percent of the 1,938 total reported child abduction cases came from 10 districts in Punjab, with Faisalabad topping the list at 426 cases followed by Rawalpindi at 356 cases.

## Labour

**Deaths of sanitation workers.** While cleaning a drain in Alipur in January, one sanitation worker tragically lost his life due to poisonous gases, while two others fell unconscious as they were not appropriately equipped with safety kits. Such incidents were not uncommon in 2023, with the same happening to at least three sanitation workers in October in Rahim Yar Khan as they fell while cleaning the sewage line.<sup>77</sup>

**Delay in paying wages.** Workers suffered delays in disbursement of salaries throughout the year. In January, more than 1,100 employees of the Pakistan Central Cotton Committee demanded the release of their salaries pending for the last seven months.<sup>78</sup>

Railways workers protested at the Pakistan Railways’ Locomotive Shed the same month for not receiving their salaries on time for the past eight months.<sup>79</sup> Hundreds of daily-wage workers of the health department staged a protest in Rawalpindi in March against the non-payment of their salaries for four months.<sup>80</sup>

**Growing demand for increased wages.** As inflation fluctuated between 25 and 45 percent in 2023, workers frequently demanded that the government raise salaries to match the increase in prices. The All Pakistan WAPDA Hydro Electric Workers Union took to the street with their demand in March.<sup>81</sup>

Hundreds of workers from the local stone-crushing industry demonstrated outside the deputy commissioner’s office in Sargodha again in March, demanding an increase in wages.<sup>82</sup> Brick kiln workers demanded the same in Kamalia that month.<sup>83</sup> In March, the Punjab caretaker government issued a notification setting the minimum wage at PKR 32,000 per month, marking an increase of PKR 7,000 to offset the impact of inflation.<sup>84</sup>



At a rally held in front of the Lahore Electric Supply Company headquarters under the aegis of the All Pakistan WAPDA Hydro Electric Workers Union on 26 January, workers protested against the privatization of distribution companies. They also demanded the Energy Division to allow recruitment of line staff as no recruitment had been made for the last six years.<sup>85</sup>



*Workers protested against the privatization of distribution companies and demanded the Energy Division allow recruitment of line staff as no recruitment had been made for the last six years.*

**Women agricultural workers.** A study titled *Gender Roles Related to Work Burden and Child Labour in Agriculture in Punjab*, conducted by the Punjab Economic Research Institute with support from the Food and Agriculture Organization, found that the Punjab government had not formally recognized the role of women in agriculture.<sup>86</sup>

In the surveyed communities of districts Multan, Bahawalpur and Vehari of Punjab, 69.1 percent of women reported their primary occupation to be household work and 24.3 percent reported agricultural labour as their second occupation.<sup>87</sup> The survey recommended that agricultural policies, advisory services, training activities, and education strategies should acknowledge the central role of women in small-scale agriculture to promote inclusivity.

**Land rights to indigenous residents.** The Bahawalpur bench of the LHC granted permission to allot 344,000 acres of land in Cholistan to local peasants in July. The Punjab caretaker government abided by the LHC order and awarded 12.5 acres of land each to about 27,000 landless peasants on a five-year term through a ballot on 7 December.<sup>88</sup> This process had been delayed since 2014.<sup>89</sup>

**Occupational safety.** HRCP's report, titled *Fighting to breathe: Occupational safety and health in Punjab's stone-crushing industry*, gauged the incidence of silicosis among labourers in stone-crushing factories in Dera Ghazi Khan, Gujranwala, Hafizabad and Sheikhpura.

It found that in Pakistan, despite legislation—Factories Act 1934, Hazardous Occupations Rules 1963 and subsequent provincially derived legislation following the devolution of labour to the provinces after the Eighteenth Amendment—there is no independent legislation protecting occupational safety and health of workers.<sup>90</sup>

## Refugees

The caretaker government of Punjab launched a crackdown on illegal foreign residents, mostly Afghan nationals, after the less than one month 1 November deadline for their voluntary return expired, and even before. This spread panic among the community, especially in the Rawalpindi division, where the administration initially issued directives calling for the indiscriminate arrest of Afghan nationals. Later, on 3 November, the Rawalpindi city police officer changed the strategy and directed the police to only focus on 'undocumented or unregistered' foreign nationals or those who had overstayed their visas.<sup>91</sup>

By 18 November, around 15,533 individuals were repatriated from the province.<sup>92</sup> Note that the caretaker chief minister Mohsin Naqvi repeatedly asserted during this time that no undocumented alien would be allowed to stay in Punjab.<sup>93</sup>

## Persons living with disabilities

In its first meeting, the Council on Rights of Persons with Disabilities, formed under the Punjab Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities Act 2022 but operationalized almost a year later, approved in September the submission of a proposal to the Punjab chief minister for the formation of special courts to facilitate persons with disabilities. In the same meeting, the council approved setting up district welfare and rehabilitation units, disability assessment boards, and protocols for a Disabled Persons Management Information System.<sup>94</sup> However, disability rights activists called for more transparency in the workings of the council to ensure that the act does not become another law rendered useless due to lack of sufficient implementation.<sup>95</sup>

In another welcome development, the caretaker chief minister Mohsin Naqvi launched the digital ecosystem Enabled Online Portal, developed by the Punjab Information Technology Board, on 4 December to mark International Day of Persons with Disabilities. This initiative aims to provide specialized assistance to persons with disabilities under the supervision of the Social Welfare Department Directorate.<sup>96</sup>



## Education

**School closures.** The Punjab Higher Education Department (HED) announced closure of all educational institutes—schools, colleges and universities—on 11 and 12 May due to the PTI’s countrywide protests over the arrest of former prime minister Imran Khan in the Al-Qadir Trust case. The HED also postponed all annual secondary school examinations to be held on these dates.<sup>97</sup> Apart from this, up to 74 public schools had to be closed because of high flooding at River Sutlej in the Pakpattan district.<sup>98</sup>

Hundreds of government schools across the province lagged behind their enrolment targets. The Lahore District Education Authority served show-cause notices to the headmasters of 30 high schools for failing to meet admission targets for the academic year 2022/23.<sup>99</sup>

**Compulsory religious studies.** On 1 January, the Punjab School Education Department issued a notification that the teaching of the Holy Quran, already introduced as a compulsory subject in all public and private schools up to the primary level, would become a compulsory subject up to the higher secondary level.<sup>100</sup>

**Delay in appointing vice-chancellors.** Dispute and litigation over the Punjab caretaker government’s powers resulted in inordinate delays in the appointment of vice-chancellors in 25 public sector universities. Pro-vice-chancellors or vice-chancellors ran the universities on additional or acting basis instead.<sup>101</sup>

## Health

**Disease outbreaks.** In June, health officials in Bahawalpur reported the deaths of three children due to measles. The outbreak of the disease was also reported in the Rawalpindi district where as many as 256 children contracted the disease between January and April. In September, some 562 patients reportedly suffering from dengue were admitted in various hospitals of Rawalpindi.<sup>102</sup>

**Under-resourced public health system.** *Dawn* reported the Bahawal Victoria Hospital in Bahawalpur faced a shortage of over 300 paramedical staff members, including 165 nurses, because according to the medical superintendent, the ECP had imposed a ban on fresh recruitment under the caretaker setup.<sup>103</sup> In a case of gross negligence on the part of the Primary and Secondary Healthcare Department, all the 64 sanctioned posts of anaesthesia specialists at the 37 tehsil headquarter hospitals in 20 districts of Punjab were lying vacant for many years.<sup>104</sup> These healthcare facilities, working without anaesthesia specialists, also included six trauma centres.

**Illegal organ trade.** The police and the Punjab Human Organ Transplant Authority in March conducted a surprise raid at a private hospital in Morgah, Rawalpindi, arresting 10 people, including three doctors, and recovered PKR 20 million. In another incident in February, the police unearthed a gang involved in organ trade in Rawalpindi.<sup>105</sup>

Organ transplant laws in Pakistan require urgent legislative amendments to allow for stricter punishment of accused individuals to curb this crime, particularly to make the state the plaintiff in such cases or allow for punishment of up to 14 years of imprisonment.<sup>106</sup>

## Housing

The development authorities tried to check the mushrooming illegal housing societies across the province in 2023. The police raided the office of a housing society in Gujranwala owned by Farhat Shahzadi, a close friend of PTI chief Imran Khan's spouse Bushra Bibi, and her husband Ahsan Jameel Gujjar and detained at least 15 society staffers.<sup>107</sup>

In Rawalpindi, several booking offices of illegal housing societies were demolished. Still, more than 318 schemes were operating in the Rawalpindi district without the approval of the Rawalpindi Development Authority, causing a strain on civic amenities and threatening the environment.<sup>108</sup>

## Environment

Despite numerous climate awareness campaigns, walks, and cycle rides, as well as efforts to crackdown on smoke-emitting vehicles, brick kilns, factories, and the arrest of farmers burning farming residue, the environmental departments struggled to effectively control the dangerously high air quality index (AQI) in Lahore and its surrounding areas.

**Measures to counter poor air quality.** In a proactive measure to combat pollution in the city, the Environmental Protection Agency reconstituted special anti-smog squads on 1 March.<sup>109</sup> These squads were to utilize GPS map cameras to procure and collect evidence in the form of videos and pictures and were required to submit daily progress reports to the authorities and highlight any issues they encounter.

In June, the district administration imposed Section 144 in the Lahore division mainly to discourage farmers from burning stubble.<sup>110</sup> The simultaneous construction of various mega infrastructure development projects not only contributed to increased pollution but also disrupted public mobility in Lahore.<sup>111</sup> To further address the smog issue, starting from 18 October, the Lahore divisional administration announced the decision to close down all commercial markets of the provincial capital

and its adjoining districts on every Wednesday for a period of two months.<sup>112</sup> A few days later, on 2 November, the LHC ordered the caretaker government of Punjab to impose a smog emergency in the provincial metropolis due to constantly hazardous air quality levels.<sup>113</sup>

On 17 November, a smart lockdown was implemented in 10 districts of Punjab, including Lahore, Nankana Sahib, Sheikhpura, Kasur, Gujranwala, Gujarat, Sialkot, Narowal, Hafizabad, and Mandi Bahauddin, with the primary objective of controlling smog. As part of this decision, all public and private educational institutions in the specified districts were ordered to remain closed on 18 November as well.<sup>114</sup>

These efforts appeared to be symbolic as, on 27 December, Lahore's ranking on the AQI reached a hazardous level of 512, posing serious health risks to its residents.<sup>115</sup>

People complained of dry cough, sore throat, itchy eyes and difficulty in breathing.<sup>116</sup> On 27 December, the city's AQI then reached a hazardous level of 512, topping the charts as the world's most polluted city.<sup>117</sup>

In a novel attempt, the Punjab government used artificial rain to lower pollution levels in Lahore on 16 December.<sup>118</sup> The practice, also called cloud seeding, created rain in 10 locations around the city using a small Cessna plane. It created a few millimetres of rain, dropping the city's AQI of more than 300 to 189. But the benefits lasted only a couple of days before pollution returned to its previous level.

Climate experts warned that the effects of cloud seeding could be unpredictable. While talking to the Guardian, Dr Ghulam Rasul, a climate expert, said that while cloud seeding may provide temporary relief from smog, it was not a sustainable solution and could create very dry conditions, possibly causing fog and smog to become even more persistent.

**Sutlej river floods.** In August, the Sutlej River experienced a significant rise in water levels, leading to the evacuation of hundreds of families from various villages in Kasur, Okara, Pakpattan, Vehari, Lodhran, Multan, Bahawalnagar, and Bahawalpur, displacing almost 100,000 individuals.<sup>119</sup>

The surge in floodwaters not only disrupted human lives and displaced livestock, but also caused damage to standing rice crops in the affected areas.<sup>120</sup>

Despite receiving flood warnings, the aid efforts were reported to be inefficient. A resident and retired air force officer Saeed Akhtar told *The Third Pole* that though the PDMA officials would come and tell them to leave their houses, they did not know where they were supposed to go.<sup>121</sup>

## Cultural rights

**Theatre raids.** In September, the police conducted raids on theatres in Lahore, issuing notices to over a dozen female actors for allegedly promoting 'vulgarity' and performing 'racy' dances. The commissioner of Lahore declared, 'We will not allow vulgar dialogues and *mujras* in theatres; it is against our religion and culture'.

As a result, about 14 commercial theatres in the Lahore division were sealed for purportedly promoting inappropriate content. Theatre owners contested the action in the LHC, and on 8 September, the court ordered the theatres to be de-sealed and directed the government to ensure that owners have sufficient time to file a reply before any further action is taken.<sup>122</sup>

**Film censorship.** Pandering to the right-wing religious lobby, the Punjab film censor board delayed the release of the film *Barbie* in July over what it termed 'objectionable content'.<sup>123</sup> Later, after widespread criticism and outrage, an edited version of the film was allowed to be screened in August.<sup>124</sup>



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