FIDH INTERNATIONAL FEDERATION FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

HRCP

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# Under the bench

## Mapping corruption risks in Pakistan's justice system


An art student paints a mural against corruption along a street in Lahore, Punjab Province. © Arif Ali / AFP

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# ACRONYMS

| | |
|---|---|
| **ACE** | Anti-Corruption Establishment |
| **CCD** | Crime Control Department |
| **EU** | European Union |
| **EUR** | Euros |
| **FCC** | Federal Constitutional Court |
| **FGEHA** | Federal Government Employee Housing Authority |
| **FIA** | Federal Investigation Agency |
| **FIDH** | International Federation for Human Rights |
| **FIR** | First Information Report |
| **GSP** | Generalised System of Preferences |
| **HRCP** | Human Rights Commission of Pakistan |
| **HRD** | Human Rights Defender |
| **ICCPR** | International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights |
| **ICT** | Islamabad Capital Territory |
| **IMF** | International Monetary Fund |
| **JCP** | Judicial Commission of Pakistan |
| **LAA** | Land Acquisition Act |
| **MIT** | Member Inspection Team |
| **MPs** | Members of Parliament |
| **NAB** | National Accountability Bureau |
| **NAO** | National Accountability Ordinance |
| **NCCIA** | National Cyber Crime Investigation Agency |
| **PCA** | Prevention of Corruption Act |
| **PECA** | Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act |
| **PKR** | Pakistani Rupee |
| **PML-N** | Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz |
| **PPC** | Pakistan Penal Code |
| **SJC** | Supreme Judicial Council |
| **SLAPP** | Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation |
| **UN** | United Nations |
| **UNCAC** | UN Convention Against Corruption |
| **UPR** | Universal Periodic Review |

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the past several years, Pakistan's democratic institutions, including the judiciary, have come under increased threat and have been subjected to gradual weakening and capture by the executive branch. This has been accompanied by severe repression of fundamental freedoms, facilitated by repressive legislation and grave violations of human rights. In this context, the judiciary has become a tool for repression and silencing of activists and dissidents.

This report details the multi-faceted ways in which corruption, endemic throughout Pakistan's judicial system, has impacted the independence and effectiveness of the judiciary, and its ability to uphold fair trial rights and protect other fundamental freedoms.

The report first describes the incidence of corruption in the judiciary, and how it is enabled by three interrelated factors: the weak administration of justice at all levels of the judicial system, which results in various form of bribery and corrupt behaviour; cultural dynamics that are conducive to favoritism and nepotism; and the erosion of judicial independence, which has resulted in state capture of the upper judiciary.

The report subsequently examines the failure by mechanisms that are in place to address corruption to provide accountability and deter corruption. In particular, the report looks at the failures of accountability mechanisms to effectively investigate allegations of corruption and hold perpetrators accountable; the ways in which accountability mechanisms have been politicised and used as tools of political victimisation rather than a pathway to address systemic corruption; and the lack of protection for whistleblowers in a context of increased repression of freedom of expression and shrinking civic space.

The report also examines the human rights impacts of corruption in the judiciary. These include: violations of the rights to due process and equality before the law, which are particularly acute for low-income communities and minorities; the link between corruption and the incidence of torture and the application of capital punishment; and the impact of corruption on gender equality within the legal profession and judiciary.

The report concludes that there are indications that judicial corruption in Pakistan has reached a systemic scale and may amount to grand corruption. The report also provides a series of recommendations related to judicial corruption, including those aimed at addressing the weak administration of justice, increasing transparency, ensuring accountability for perpetrators, and protecting whistleblowers.

# 1 - INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Political context

Over the past several years, there has been a notable weakening of democratic institutions in Pakistan - including the judiciary [see Chapter 2]. Fundamental freedoms, particularly the rights to freedom of movement, assembly, expression and association, have continued to be severely targeted and restricted by the state. Repressive legislation, such as the 1997 Anti-Terrorism Act and the 2016 Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA),[1] has been regularly weaponised by the state against human rights defenders (HRDs), opposition figures and others to suppress dissent. The 2024 Peaceful Assembly and Public Order Act,[2] which bans or restricts public assemblies in the Islamabad Capital Territory (ICT), has been used to preemptively detain political workers of the opposition and human rights activists, such as Aurat March activists and participants ahead of a planned rally for International Women's Day.[3]

Meanwhile, grave violations of human rights, including alarming rates of extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances, have continued to be reported. In 2025 alone, the Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances received 273 new cases of enforced disappearances, numbers which are likely to be significantly underreported.[4] At least three journalists were killed in connection with their work in 2024, and one in 2025.[5]

These violations have been compounded by repeated internet shutdowns and blocks on social media. On 17 February 2024, the Ministry of Interior announced a ban on X (formerly Twitter), which lasted until May 2025. In 2024, 21 partial internet shutdowns were imposed, up from four in 2022 and seven in 2023.[6] The environment for media has continued to be restrictive, and journalists have regularly faced intimidation, surveillance, regulatory scrutiny and threats, which has contributed to increased self-censorship.[7]

This worsening of the human rights situation came on the heels of the general election held in February 2024, which saw the victory of the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and the election of Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, which was widely criticised for lacking transparency and fairness. Concerns have been raised regarding the pre-election exclusion and arbitrary detentions of opposition candidates and activists, internet shutdowns and pressures on the Election Commission.[8]

1 For a detailed analysis of PECA, see: HRCP, *Prevention of Electronic Crimes (Amendment) Act 2025,* 2025, https://hrcp-web.org/hrcpweb/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2025-LWC10-PECA-Amendment-Act-2025.pdf.

2 For a detailed analysis of the Act, see: HRCP, *Peaceful Assembly and Public Order Act 2024,* 2024, https://hrcp-web.org/hrcpweb/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2024-LWC08-Peaceful-Assembly-and-Public-Order-Act-2024.pdf.

3 Dawn, *Dozens of Aurat March activists, participants detained by police in Islamabad ahead of International Women's Day rally,* 8 March 2026, https://www.dawn.com/news/1979796.

4 HRCP, *State of Human Rights in 2024,* September 2025, https://hrcp-web.org/hrcpweb/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2025-State-of-Human-Rights-in-2024-REV.pdf.

5 Committee to Protect Journalists data, https://cpj.org/data/killed/all/?status=Killed&type%5B%5D=Journalist&motiveConfirmed%5B%5D=Confirmed&typeOfDeath%5B%5D=Murder&cc_fips%5B%5D=PK&start_year=2024&end_year=2025&group_by=year.

6 Access Now, *Shutdown Tracker Optimization Project Dashboard,* https://www.accessnow.org/keepiton-data-dashboard/.

7 Committee to Protect Journalists, FIDH et al, *Open Letter to Pakistan PM to address worsening press freedom climate,* 25 February 2026, https://cpj.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/Joint-CSO-Letter-to-Pakistan-PM-.pdf.

8 For a comprehensive analysis of the February 2024 election, see: HRCP, *A Tainted Election: Pakistan at the polls*, September 2024, https://hrcp-web.org/hrcpweb/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2024-A-Tainted-Election.pdf.

## 1.2 Objectives

The present research and report were undertaken under the International Federation for Human Rights' (FIDH) global project on corruption and human rights, which is undertaken jointly with Transparency International. FIDH's strategic work on corruption and human rights aims to contribute to accountability of states, individuals and companies for acts of grand corruption that negatively impact human rights. In addition to country-specific research and publications, this strategy aims to develop a human rights-based methodology for investigating corruption and to dispel the myth that corruption is a "victimless crime."

The report aims to investigate and expose the multi-faceted ways in which corruption impacts the independence and effectiveness of Pakistan's judiciary and its ability to uphold fair trials rights and protect other fundamental freedoms. The report looks in particular at structural issues, such as the weak administration of justice and the politicisation of the judiciary, and how these impact judicial independence and access to justice. The research is a supplement to previous work done by FIDH and the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) on the judiciary and fair trial rights in Pakistan, and in particular to joint research work undertaken in 2018 and 2019 on the use of capital punishment, which began to examine issues of corruption within the judicial system. This report aims to add to this work by highlighting how corruption in the judiciary is a factor and a tool that reinforce the concerning trends explained above.

## 1.3 Methodology

The findings of the report are based on interviews conducted with 30 interlocutors (including four women) with knowledge of the subject matter, such as lawyers, former/retired judges (including two former Chief Justices of Pakistan, former Supreme Court judges and one former High Court judge), journalists and representatives of civil society organisations. The research team interviewed people based in Lahore (Punjab Province), Islamabad, Peshawar (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province), and Karachi (Sindh Province). Some interviewees also had insights on the situation in Balochistan Province. Due to resource constraints, the researchers were not able to gather information related to the judiciary in Gilgit-Baltistan or Azad Kashmir.

Interviews were conducted in February and March 2026 in English via a secured videoconferencing platform by a Pakistan-based researcher, Asad Jamal, and a Brussels-based researcher, using a standard framework of questions aimed at identifying factual elements of the occurrence of corruption in the judiciary and its human rights impacts. The researchers were assisted by HRCP staff member Salman Farrukh.

Efforts were made to ensure gender equality and that a focus was placed on the particular challenges women face in the judicial system and how corruption impacts women [see Chapter 5]. However, due to the low representation of women in the judiciary [see Section 5.3], the researchers were only able to interview a limited number of female lawyers and no female judges.

Given the sensitivity of the subject, the majority of the interviewees agreed to speak to the researchers on condition of anonymity. For safety and privacy reasons, all quotes used in this report have been anonymised.

**What is corruption?**

A universal legal definition of corruption has not yet been adopted. The UN Convention Against Corruption (UNCAC) does not propose such a definition and instead lists the key offences constitutive of corruption [see Section 2.4.1]. Transparency International defines corruption as "the abuse of entrusted power for private gain" and grand corruption as "the abuse of high-level power that benefits the few at the expense of the many and causes serious and widespread harm to individuals and society."[9] Notably, according to this definition, grand corruption emerges when the commission of offences listed in UNCAC's Articles 15-25 involves a high-level public official, and results in, or is intended to result in, a gross misappropriation of public funds or resources, and/or gross violations, including indirectly, of the human rights of a substantial part of the population or a vulnerable group.

Similarly, although a definition of "state capture through corruption" does not exist in international law, FIDH has proposed the following framework: state capture occurs when all of the following elements are present: (1) acts of corruption, such as bribery or embezzlement, are committed; (2) the acts are covertly coordinated among individuals; (3) the acts enable captors to decisively shape the rules of the game to secure private gain or illicit revenue or to shield criminal activities; and (4) the commission of these acts results in the diversion of state institutions – or the state as a whole – away from the general interest.[10]

Interviews were conducted in a manner that allowed interviewees to define corruption as broadly as they wanted. As such, interviewees identified acts that ranged from petty corruption to state capture through corruption.

9 FIDH & Transparency International, *Breaking the Silos: A Practical Guide to Fighting Corruption with a Human Rights-Based Approach*, March 2026, https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/20260615_fidh_guide-corruption_en_web.pdf.

10 FIDH & Transparency International, *Breaking the Silos: A Practical Guide to Fighting Corruption with a Human Rights-Based Approach*, March 2026.

# 2 - CONTEXT

## 2.1 Fair trial rights and judicial independence in Pakistan

Despite the introduction of Article 10A, which protects due process and fair trial rights, to the Fundamental Rights chapter of the Constitution through the 18th Amendment in 2010, fair trial rights continue to be regularly violated at all levels of the judiciary in Pakistan. The World Justice Project's 2025 Rule of Law Index ranks Pakistan 101st out of 143 countries surveyed for criminal justice and 129th out of 143 for civil justice.[11]

Due process and fair trial rights violations are compounded by the backlog in the Pakistani justice system, which remains immense. In September 2025, the Minister for Law and Justice, Azam Nazeer Tarar, stated that there were 2.4 million cases pending in courts nationwide, including over 300,000 before the High Courts and 1.8 million before the District Courts.[12] Although measures have been put in place to reduce the backlog at the Supreme Court level, there were 56,169 pending cases before the Supreme Court, as of October 2025.[13]

In the criminal justice system, cases are underpinned by weak and often flawed investigations at the police level and are heavily reliant on witness testimonies and forced confessions, rather than on forensic evidence. These issues are rarely addressed at the trial court stage, where conviction rates remain very high. With regard to civil justice, frivolous cases are routinely filed in civil courts, contributing to the backlog.

Against a backdrop of longstanding systemic issues, two recent Constitutional amendments have had a significant negative impact on judicial independence and the protection of fair trial rights in Pakistan. In October 2024, the 26th Constitutional Amendment fundamentally changed the composition of the Judicial Commission of Pakistan (JCP), which appoints judges to the Supreme Court and provincial High Courts, by adding Members of Parliament (MPs) to the JCP. It also empowered the Supreme Judicial Council (SJC) to remove judges on grounds of "inefficiency in the performance of duties" as well as for failing to accept a transfer.[14]

In November 2025, the 27th Constitutional Amendment created the Federal Constitutional Court (replacing a Constitutional Bench at the Supreme Court created under the 26th Amendment), granting the Prime Minister the authority to nominate its Chief Justice and judges.

These developments mark a regressive shift in Pakistan's legal and constitutional order, by completely stripping the limited independence previously enjoyed by the judiciary. Judicial appointments, bench formation and high-level case management are now subject to political influence in ways that contradict international standards for judicial independence. Moreover, these structural distortions at the top impact the lower judiciary, where judges are influenced by higher courts regarding their own conduct and decision-making, and where the potential to be influenced by external pressures is greater.

11 World Justice Project, *Rule of Law 2025 Index*, https://worldjusticeproject.org/rule-of-law-index/country/2025/Pakistan/Criminal%20Justice/.

12 Arab News, *Pakistan calls for alternative dispute resolution methods with 2.4 million cases pending*, 21 September 2025, https://www.arabnews.com/node/2616177/pakistan.

13 Dawn, *Supreme Court sees drop in pending cases*, 25 October 2025, https://www.dawn.com/news/1951112. See also: Law and Justice Commission of Pakistan, *Press Release,* https://ljcp.gov.pk/SiteImage/Misc/files/Press_Release_28_2026.pdf

14 Prior to the 26th Amendment, transfers could not take place without judges' consent. See: Dawn, *Judges' transfer without their consent: Constitutional validity of 27th Amendment challenged in LHC*, 22 January 2026, https://www.dawn.com/news/1968392.

## 2.2 Widespread corruption in Pakistan

Attacks on judicial independence and fundamental freedoms have been compounded by widespread corruption in public institutions. Transparency International Pakistan's 2025 National Corruption Perception Survey found that the police sector is perceived as the most corrupt in Pakistan, with the judiciary in third place, nationally.[15] Factors perceived to lead to corruption included: lack of accountability; lack of transparency and restricted access to information; and delays in judgements in corruption cases. In 2023, Transparency International Pakistan calculated that the highest average expenditure on bribery was in the judiciary, and that individuals paid on average PKR 25,846 (approximately EUR 80) per instance of bribery in the judiciary.[16] Meanwhile, the World Justice Project's 2025 Rule of Law Index ranks Pakistan 123rd out of 143 countries (and second to last regionally) for absence of corruption.[17]


An art student paints a mural against corruption along a street in Lahore, Punjab Province. © Arif Ali / AFP

In its Concluding Observations on Pakistan's second periodic report in November 2024, the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Committee was concerned about "reports that corruption remains prevalent at all levels, including in the judiciary, that the judiciary and military are subject to internal disciplinary systems only and that accountability mechanisms for public officials are often selectively applied and politically motivated."[18] The Committee also noted with regret "the lack of comprehensive whistle-blower protection legislation at the federal and provincial levels."

In November 2025, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) released a Governance and Corruption Diagnostic Report, which described corruption in Pakistan as "persistent and corrosive," due to weak institutions, including anti-corruption agencies. The report highlighted issues including elite influence over, and capture of, policymaking, and low levels of trust in public institutions.[19] To address conditionalities for the ongoing IMF programme, the government subsequently issued a 142-point economic governance reform plan, which included reforms to the judiciary, particularly in relation to its ability to adjudicate on economic and financial crimes and to reduce the backlog of economic

15 Transparency International Pakistan, *National Corruption Perception Survey 2025,* https://transparency.org.pk/new-event/national-corruption-perception-survey-2025/.

16 Transparency International Pakistan, *National Corruption Perception Survey 2023,* https://transparency.org.pk//NCPS_REPORTS/NCPS-2023/National-Corruption-Perception-Survey-2023-Report-TI-Pakistan.pdf.

17 World Justice Project, *Rule of Law 2025 Index,* https://worldjusticeproject.org/rule-of-law-index/country/2025/Pakistan/Absence%20of%20Corruption.

18 UN Human Rights Committee, *Concluding observations on the 2nd periodic report of Pakistan*, 2 December 2024, UN Doc. CCPR/C/PAK/CO/2, https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4068203?v=pdf.

19 International Monetary Fund, *Pakistan: Governance and Corruption Diagnostic Report*, 20 November 2025, https://www.imf.org/en/publications/high-level-summary-technical-assistance-reports/issues/2025/11/20/pakistan-governance-and-corruption-diagnostic-report-571961.

disputes before the courts. It also included key reforms related to the appointment procedures of corruption agencies, including the National Accountability Bureau (NAB).

As a beneficiary of the European Union's (EU) Generalised System of Preferences Plus (GSP+) scheme, Pakistan is subject to bi-annual monitoring of its obligations under the scheme, including "effective implementation" of the UNCAC [see Section 2.3.1]. One of the 13 priorities for the 2024-2025 monitoring cycle included the "fight against corruption," including the independence and effectiveness of anti-corruption agencies, and judicial accountability.

## 2.3 Regulatory framework

### 2.3.1 International legal framework

Pakistan is a state party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which it ratified in 2010. Although the ICCPR does not specifically mention corruption, the UN Human Rights Committee has consistently addressed corruption in its recommendations to states parties and its impact on the protection and fulfilment of core Covenant rights, including fair trial (Article 14), participation in public affairs (Article 25), and non-discrimination (Article 2).

Pakistan is also a state party to the UNCAC, which it ratified in 2007. The UNCAC does not provide a definition of corruption and instead lists key offences that constitute corruption.[20] It also lists state obligations to: prevent corruption through preventive systems in both the public and private sectors (such as anti-corruption policies and bodies); criminalise offences amounting to corruption; cooperate internationally on corruption cases; and implement mechanisms for asset recovery.

### 2.3.2 Domestic laws

Corruption is first and foremost addressed in the following sections of the Pakistan Penal Code (PPC);[21] 161 ("public servant receiving gratification other than legal remuneration in respect to an official act");[22] 162 ("taking gratification, in order by corrupt or illegal means to influence public servant"); 163 ("taking gratification, for exercise of personal influence with public servant"); 164 (abetment by a public servant of offences under Sections 162 and 163); and 165 (public servant obtaining valuable things without consideration or with inadequate consideration from persons connected with their official work, and related abetment). Section 161, 162, 164 and 165 are all punishable by up to three years in prison and/or a fine, and Section 163 with up to one year in prison and/or a fine.

The PPC is supplemented by the 1947 Prevention of Corruption Act (PCA), which specifies that offences under Sections 161 to 165 of the PPC are cognisable offences (i.e. offences for which police officers do not need a warrant to conduct an arrest) for the purposes of the Code of Criminal Procedure. It also explicitly defines "criminal misconduct" and "corruption and corrupt practices" and prescribes heavier penalties than the PPC. The PCA is supplemented by provincial-level laws, including the 1950 Sindh Prevention of Bribery and Corruption Act, the 1961 West Pakistan Anti-Corruption Establishment Ordinance, and the 1961 Punjab Anti-Corruption Establishment Act.

Finally, the 1999 National Accountability Ordinance (NAO)[23] builds upon the PPC and PCA by providing, in Section 9, more specific definitions of types of corruption and corrupt practices. It also

20 United Nations Convention Against Corruption, 2004, https://www.unodc.org/documents/treaties/UNCAC/Publications/Convention/08-50026_E.pdf.

21 Pakistan Penal Code, https://www.pakistani.org/pakistan/legislation/1860/actXLVof1860.html.

22 The full text of Section 161 states: "Whoever, being or expecting to be a public servant, accepts or obtains, agrees to accept, or attempts to obtain from any person, for himself or for any other person, any gratification whatever, other than legal remuneration, as a motive or reward for doing or forbearing to do any official act or for showing or forbearing to show, in the exercise of his official functions, favour or disfavour to any person, or for rendering or attempting to render any service or disservice to any person, with the Federal, or any Provincial Government or Legislature or with any public servant, as such, shall be punished with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to three years or with fine or with both." It is further specified that gratification is "not restricted to pecuniary gratifications, or to gratifications estimable in money.

23 National Accountability Ordinance, 1999, https://www.fmu.gov.pk/docs/laws/NATIONAL%20ACCOUNTABILITY%20ORDINANCE.pdf.

extends criminal responsibility to "holders of public office" and "any other person." Section 10 also provides for lengthier prison sentences of up to 10 years for offences under Section 9. Importantly, Section 14(c) includes the offence of "assets beyond known sources of income" (i.e. unjustified wealth), for which it places the burden on the accused to prove the sources of such assets.

In practice, the PPC and the PCA are typically used in petty bribery cases and those involving low-level officials, whereas the NAO tends to be used in cases of grand corruption and/or cases involving high-level officials or politicians.

In April 2025, the Whistleblowers Protection and Vigilance Commission Bill was introduced by the federal government in the Senate, where it was subsequently reviewed by the Senate Standing Committee on Law and Justice, which recommended its approval by the Senate. Although the Senate passed it and transferred it to the National Assembly, the Assembly's Standing Committee raised several objections to the bill when it considered it on 6 August 2025, and failed to report it back to the full Assembly within a 15-day deadline. In February 2026, the Senate adopted a motion to consider the bill in a joint sitting of Parliament, which had not been convened at the time of publication of this report.[24] The bill would be applicable to federal government entities and departments, and supplement provincial-level laws that have been passed to implement Article 33 of the UNCAC (on the protection of reporting persons). Only one province, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, has adopted such legislation to date: the 2016 Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Whistleblower Protection and Vigilance Commission Act.[25]

### 2.3.3 Regulatory bodies and agencies

Mandated by the NAO, the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) was created in 1999 with its own investigative and prosecutorial powers, as well as a prevention mandate. Prosecutions initiated by the NAB occur before Accountability Courts, to which serving District and Sessions Judges (who are qualified for High Court appointments) are appointed by the federal government and the provincial Chief Justice.

Corruption is also regulated by the Federal Investigative Agency (FIA), which was established by the 1974 Federal Investigative Agency Act. Its jurisdiction is limited to employees of federal government bodies. The FIA is also endowed with a broad mandate to investigate and prosecute offences under special laws – including immigration, cybercrime, transnational/organised crime, certain economic and corporate offences (including fraud and corruption-related offences), and money laundering – as criminalised under the FIA Act, the PCA and the 2010 Anti-Money Laundering Act. Its jurisdiction sometimes overlaps with that of the NAB for the purpose of accountability of employees of the federal government, as well as for cases of corruption involving PKR 500 million (approximately EUR 1.5 million) or more.

While the NAB and the FIA investigate and prosecute high-level cases of corruption, cases involving low-level officials of provincial governments and so-called petty bribery (as offences under the PCA and the PPC) are typically handled by provincial Anti-Corruption Establishments (ACEs). ACEs are present in Sindh, Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan Provinces, and derive their mandates from provincial Prevention of Corruption Acts. In the ICT, all cases are dealt by the FIA and the NAB. Although ACEs do not have general jurisdiction to investigate complaints related to the judiciary, they have jurisdiction over police departments. ACEs can also receive directions from the SJC to conduct inquiries and/or produce and submit evidence or information under Articles 209 and 210 of the Constitution.

Within the provincial judiciary, which are independent under Pakistan's federal constitutional structure, Member Inspection Teams (MITs) within the High Courts are established to inspect and

24 The News, *TIP concerned over delay in passage of whistleblower law*, 14 April 2026, https://www.thenews.pk/print/1410054-tip-concerned-over-delay-in-passage-of-whistleblower-law.

25 Dawn, *Whistleblowers to get cash payouts*, 20 September 2026, https://www.dawn.com/news/1284862.

supervise the district judiciary and its staff, with a mandate to, *inter alia*, receive and investigate complaints regarding alleged irregularities and misconduct. MITs are not established under specific provincial laws; once reports are submitted by MITs, the High Court has the authority (under Article 203 of the Constitution)[26] to nominate an inquiry officer. The rules and notifications of each High Court provide further guidance as to each MIT's powers and functions. MITs are established at the provincial level and their functions and powers are regulated by provincial laws. In Punjab Province, MITs are constituted and function to receive complaints under the 1999 Punjab Civil Servant (Efficiency and Discipline) Rules, which is derived from the 1974 Punjab Civil Servant Act; in Balochistan Province, under the 2021 Balochistan District Judiciary Act and the 2021 Balochistan District Judiciary Staff Service Rules; in Sindh Province, under the 1973 Sindh Civil Service Act and the 1994 Sindh Judicial Service Rules; and in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province, under the 2011 Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Government Servants (Efficiency and Discipline) Rules.

Finally, Articles 209-211 of the Constitution provide for the establishment of the SJC, whose mandate includes the investigation of alleged misconduct by Supreme Court or High Court judges, as well as the newly created Federal Constitutional Court (FCC).[27] The SJC can investigate cases on its own initiative upon receiving information or a complaint, or after receiving a report from the JCP, or on the direction of the President of Pakistan. The SJC was previously composed of the Chief Justice of Pakistan, the next two most senior Supreme Court judges and the two most senior Chief Justices of High Courts. Since the passage of the 27th Constitutional Amendment [see Section 2.1 above], the SJC is composed of the Chief Justice of the FCC, the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, the next most senior FCC judge and the two most senior High Court Chief Justices.

### 2.3.4 Policies and initiatives

In addition to the above-mentioned laws and legally-mandated bodies, a number of different policy documents and initiatives have been adopted by different institutions to address corruption. With regard to the judiciary specifically, in 2009, the Law and Justice Commission of Pakistan issued a National Judicial Policy (subsequently revised in 2012), which recommended 13 concrete steps to eradicate corruption in the judiciary, including the establishment of a "cell for eradication of corruption from judiciary" at each High Court, surprise inspections by judges of the High Courts to monitor lower courts and rotation of judicial officers between districts every three years.[28] It also recommended that MITs in High Courts examine judgements of judicial officers in order to "guard against the evil of nepotism, favouritism, corrupt means."

In March 2025, the Supreme Court established an anti-corruption hotline, which is tasked with receiving complaints about alleged bribery within the Supreme Court.

26 Article 203 of the Constitution states that "each High Court shall supervise and control all courts subordinate to it."

27 The SJC's mandate also includes conducting inquiries into a judge if a judge is: (a) incapable of properly performing the duties of his office by reason of physical or mental incapacity; (b) inefficient in the performance of the duties of his office; (c) guilty of misconduct, or (d) unwilling to accept a transfer under Article 200.

28 Law and Justice Commission of Pakistan, *National Judicial Policy,* https://mis.ihc.gov.pk/attachments/downloads/National_Judicial_Policy_____.pdf.

# 3 - JUDICIAL CORRUPTION IN PAKISTAN

Enabled by weak implementation and enforcement of corruption-related laws and regulations, and widespread elite capture of institutions, corruption has become widespread and normalised at all levels of the Pakistani judiciary. The following chapter examines several root causes (or drivers and enablers) of corruption: the weak administration of justice that facilitates financial corruption; the cultural dynamics that enable favouritism and nepotism; and the erosion of judicial independence – and the ways in which corruption is manifested at various levels of the judicial system.

## 3.1 Weak administration of justice

A large majority of interviewees attributed the prevalence of corruption within the judicial system to a weak administration of justice, and to a lack of adequate safeguards that would ensure transparency and reduce the opportunities for corrupt behaviour. As examined in Chapter 2, the Pakistani justice system suffers from long-standing systemic issues, starting at the police level, where flawed police investigations often result in unnecessary or unsubstantiated cases, all the way to the highest courts.

### 3.1.1 Police investigations

Corruption in the form of bribery or extortion starts in the majority of cases at the police level. As one journalist told FIDH and HRCP: "Corruption in police has become a way of life and corruption is not reported as an exclusive story."[29] Interviewees reported that it was often, if not always, necessary to bribe police officers in order to file First Information Reports (FIRs), which are a necessary and preliminary step to any police investigation. Interviewees also told FIDH and HRCP that in many cases, people were reluctant, if not completely unwilling, to report such cases of corruption, because of the perception that there would be reprisals by the police, which would negatively harm the investigation.

One lawyer gave an example of a case in which his client had been given a check by another party, which had not been honoured. The police asked the lawyer's client for a bribe of PKR 300,000 (approximately EUR 929), or approximately 3% of the value of the check, in order to file the FIR.[30] The client agreed to pay the bribe, because he would be dependent on the police for the subsequent investigation and thus did not want to damage his relationship with the police. Paying the bribe was seen as a way to "cultivate a good relationship with the police from the start."

While corruption at the police level is often limited to the payment of bribes to file FIRs or advance the investigation in other ways, such as the fabrication or alteration of evidence,[31] corruption can also be a cause and consequence of much more acute situations. In the context of police encounters and raids, for example, there have been reports of police officers requesting bribes to avoid arrests, manipulating reports and criminal records and seizing private property.[32]

29 FIDH-HRCP Interview, Islamabad, 2 February 2026.

30 FIDH-HRCP Interview, Islamabad, 3 February 2026.

31 The issue of the potential for alteration or fabrication of digitalised evidence, including as a consequence of corruption, was taken up by the Lahore High Court in July 2024; see: Dawn, *LHC refers 'forgery' in police record digitisation case to larger bench, 25 July 2024,* https://www.dawn.com/news/1858383. See also: PLJ 2025 Cr.C. 453 Crl. Misc.1979-B-24 Rahat Abbas etc. vs. State etc. Mr. Justice Ali Zia Bajwa 2024 LHC 3574, https://sys.lhc.gov.pk/appjudgments/.

32 See for instance: HRCP, *The CCD's role in Punjab: An HRCP fact-finding report*, February 2026, https://hrcp-web.org/hrcpweb/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2026-The-CCDs-role-in-Punjab.pdf.

### 3.1.2 Opaque procedures in the judiciary

Corruption continues once cases move to the judiciary. Complicated and/or opaque procedures at all levels of the judiciary and across all different types of courts were identified by several interviewees as encouraging or facilitating corruption.

Interviewees described several ways in which financial corruption is manifested at this level of the judiciary. Lawyers were reported to charge for "extra services" to navigate court procedures. In some cases, lawyers gave bribes to administrative staff in the registrar's office to schedule cases for hearing before certain judges or certain benches, to secure specific hearing dates or to schedule hearings for earlier dates. In other cases, they gave bribes to judicial officers to file paperwork, secure certified copies of judgements and other documents more quickly or even to remove files from, or forge, evidence placed on the record.

The lack of transparency in the system to schedule cases for hearings was mentioned by an overwhelming number of interviewees as a major contributing factor to corruption. In most courts, judges, and especially the chief justice and the registrar, have significant leeway in deciding which cases are scheduled for hearing, when and before which judge, creating incentives for bribery. In many cases, this means that litigants with resources can pay to either have hearings speedily scheduled on the court's agenda, or to ensure that hearings are not scheduled – depending on which option is more advantageous for their case. The extreme backlog in the Pakistani judiciary creates incentives to bribe to have hearings scheduled. However, keeping cases pending in the system is a contributing factor to the backlog.

### 3.1.3 Evidence tampering

At least one interviewee noted that, in his experience, bribes could also be used to alter or tamper with evidence after it had been filed before the court. He described to FIDH and HRCP a trial in which he was defending an individual accused of blasphemy offences, when, during cross-examination, he realised that the documentary evidence that had been included in the court files was not the same as the documents that he had been given by the prosecution prior to the trial.[33]

### 3.1.4 Differences between courts

Interviewees were not in agreement regarding whether corruption was more prevalent in certain courts (civil, criminal) or whether it was evenly present across different parts of the lower judiciary. Some interviewees opined that monetary corruption was more prevalent in civil courts and particularly in cases of commercial disputes where large sums of money were at stake and thus where one party, or both, were able to spend considerable amounts on bribery to secure favourable processes and judgements. However, some interviewees opined that corruption was more prevalent in criminal courts, particularly in cases where the stakes were high (such as offences that are punishable by life imprisonment or death). Regardless, for the majority of interviewees, and particularly lawyers, the perception of corruption was tied to their own practice and to the types of cases and courts with which they had experience.

### 3.1.5 Perception vs actual corruption

Although the majority of interviewees described a system in which corruption was omnipresent and normalised throughout the judiciary, a small number of interviewees believed that the perception of financial corruption was greater than its actual incidence, and that many lawyers took advantage of the perception that all cases and judges could be influenced in their interest with sufficient funds. These interviewees also believed that in some cases, just because a bribe was accepted did not

33 FIDH-HRCP Interview, Lahore, 20 February 2026.

mean that the judge would decide the case in favour of the party giving the bribe. One lawyer told FIDH and HRCP: "It's a complicated picture."[34]

Regardless of whether or not judgements were easily influenceable, interviewees were unanimous in describing a context in which corruption had become normalised. One lawyer who had held several leadership positions with bar councils and associations in Sindh Province recounted how the bar associations received many complaints from litigants because their lawyers had accepted "extra fees" under the promise that they would be able to influence judgements, but the cases had not been decided in their favour.[35] One lawyer reminded FIDH and HRCP: "You will find many people in Pakistan saying, 'we don't hire lawyers, we just hire judges.'"[36]

The lack of clarity or transparency over official court fees[37] was highlighted by some interviewees as a situation in which litigants did not know how much they should be charged, and thus were told by their lawyers that they needed to pay certain amounts for certain services, without necessarily being aware that these payments were in fact for bribes. Overall, those interviewed agreed that these bribes had become so normalised that no one really spoke about it anymore.

### 3.1.6 Lack of procedural safeguards

Some interviewees noted that the technical reforms that had been implemented in some courts to mitigate the opportunities for corruption – such as installing glass walls and doors in the registrar's office or installing CCTV cameras in courtrooms – had not been effective, and that the exchange of money could simply take place in private places, such as bathrooms, or anywhere outside the court premises.

Moreover, in May 2026, it was reported that a high percentage of CCTV cameras on court premises were malfunctioning or out of order, including about half of those installed at the Karachi City Courts[38] and all 77 installed within the Rawalpindi District Courts complex and the CCTV monitoring control room.[39]

## 3.2 Cultural dynamics

While the financial corruption described above was recognised as a negative aspect of the judicial system by all those interviewed, the majority opined that the use of influence and cultural and social networks was more prevalent (and perhaps more problematic) and widespread through the judiciary.

One of the factors identified was a deep culture in Pakistan of exchanging favours, which involve strong expectations that one will help or otherwise provide favours to family members or personal acquaintances, if in a relative position of power. As one lawyer told FIDH and HRCP: "As lawyers your biggest fear is to annoy the judge you appear before, the fear that you will be financially ruined; the fear also to annoy your peers."[40] Implied in this observation was the culture of obedience, where lawyers are careful not to "offend" judges because doing so would likely have impacts on one's own career advancement and opportunities for promotion to judicial offices. As a result, interviewed

34 FIDH-HRCP Interview, Karachi, 20 February 2026.

35 FIDH-HRCP Interview, Karachi, 20 February 2026.

36 FIDH-HRCP Interview, Lahore, 20 February 2026.

37 Under the 1870 Court Fees Act, the term "court fees" refers to a certain category of taxes or levies intended to cover expenses incurred by the state to administer justice.

38 Dawn, *50pc CCTV cameras in City Courts not working, SHC told*, 30 May 2025, https://www.dawn.com/news/1914257.

39 Tribune, *District courts left without security gates*, 18 May 2026, https://tribune.com.pk/story/2608719/district-courts-left-without-security-gates.

40 FIDH-HRCP Interview, Islamabad, 3 February 2026.

lawyers said they were often careful about how they dealt with perceived corruption by judges, in part because they did not want to be negatively seen by their peers.

Nepotism or favouritism resulting from personal connections were identified repeatedly by interviewees as key forms of corruption in the Pakistani judicial system. Interviewees reported that judges often gave more favourable judgements to "senior lawyers" or lawyers who were well-connected. One lawyer described how that influence was often exercised through other judges, such as more senior judges who would request that a subordinate judge "look out" for certain litigants or "take it easy on them."[41]

It should be noted that some interviewees attributed variations in levels of corruption across different provinces to cultural differences. Some lawyers based in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province observed that the culture of corruption was more prevalent in Punjab and Sindh Provinces. Moreover, some Karachi-based lawyers opined that how one viewed and understood corruption depended on one's own culture and background. They noted that tribal (*biradari*) contacts had a broad influence, and that corruption could easily be facilitated when societal connections based on tribal or ethnic and linguistic ties that created inherent trust could be leveraged.

One lawyer recounted to FIDH and HRCP: "The most of frequent [form of corruption] and the one that they don't talk about [is one where] they accommodate their peers. It's a social reward rather than a financial one. If you are appearing against a lawyer who is the son of another judge, or who sits on the Judicial Commission of Pakistan [...] they will not give you a fair hearing because the other side's lawyer is someone they want to oblige."[42] Close relatives of serving and retired judges were described as being more easily able to command the judge's attention and being rewarded by either being granted relief or at least a sympathetic hearing.

Karachi-based lawyers described to FIDH and HRCP how influence was exercised in social settings outside of the courtroom, and particularly in popular restaurants frequented by judges across the street from the Karachi District Court. They also described two practices used to curry favours: "cake politics," whereby some lawyers kept lists of the birthdays of judges in the courts they litigated in and systematically brought them cakes on their birthdays; and "funeral politics," whereby some lawyers were reported to travel often long distances to attend funerals of relatives of judges in order to be seen more favourably by them.[43]

Some interviewees also said that while in the past the higher courts were more immune than the lower courts to influence and social connections, as superior court judges kept a degree of social isolation, this was no longer case. A lawyer and former assistant Attorney General told FIDH and HRCP: "There was a time when judges at the High Court or the Supreme Court were less approachable and the judges of the courts below were [more] approachable and easily manoeuvrable but now I see the same trends in the judges of the superior courts."[44]

Overall, interviewees expressed that there was a lack of incentives to refrain from engaging in corrupt practices, and that there was a benefit to be gained from engaging in these practices. Almost all lawyers interviewed by FIDH and HRCP spoke of similar dynamics where a lawyer's ability to "game the system" (i.e. bribe or use their personal connections to influence court proceedings or speed up proceedings) was seen as a net positive by potential clients. They also strongly believed that not engaging in these practices would result in losing clients.

41 FIDH-HRCP Interview, Karachi, 20 February 2026.

42 FIDH-HRCP Interview, Islamabad, 3 February 2026.

43 FIDH-HRCP Interview, Karachi, 10 March 2026.

44 FIDH-HRCP Interview, Islamabad, 2 February 2026.

## 3.3 State capture and the erosion of judicial independence

Many interviewees placed the blame for the high levels of corruption and misconduct on the higher judiciary, because its engaging in "bad behaviours" or being perceived as heavily subjected to political interference without accountability encouraged corrupt behaviour within the lower judiciary. A journalist told FIDH and HRCP: "Since the superior judiciary has been captured by the military and the current government, the lower judiciary is not bothered at all."[45]

### 3.3.1 Interference

The lack of independence of the judiciary and the rampant interference by the military and security establishment into judicial matters was described at length by the majority of those interviewed as a form of corruption, as well as a consequence of high-level corruption and as a driver of petty corruption. One lawyer told FIDH and HRCP: "The judges have an expectation that if they go by the law, the security agencies and the state will not be happy. So they decide to pass judgements which are illegal in order to avoid adverse consequences for themselves."[46] One lawyer expressed that most judges came to some sort of accommodation of government pressure and that it was likely that only a small minority of judges resisted that pressure.[47]

Within the district judiciary, multiple interviewees spoke of the use of transfers to different districts as a form of reprisal for judges who failed to toe the government line. In Punjab Province especially, appointments to specific districts were seen as a strong motivation to acquiesce to government pressures, while appointments to others – such as Multan – were considered as punishment for failing to do so. Other forms of punishment were highlighted by interviewees who mentioned specific cases, including a judge who had his law degree invalidated after granting bail to a defendant in a politically-motivated case,[48] and a judge who was transferred to a research chamber of the court in order to force his subsequent resignation.[49]

Several interviewees also discussed how certain judges' corrupt behaviour was used as leverage by military and intelligence agencies against them. One lawyer told FIDH and HRCP: "The kind of judges who are appointed as chief justices are appointed because they have skeletons. One of the major skeletons they have in their cupboards is that they are not financially upright."[50] Interviewees described the general perception that intelligence agencies kept comprehensive files on all judges and looked for weak spots (such as financial corruption) to ensure that judges could be controlled.

45 FIDH-HRCP Interview, Islamabad, 2 February 2026.

46 FIDH-HRCP Interview, Islamabad, 3 February 2026.

47 FIDH-HRCP Interview, Karachi, 20 February 2026.

48 FIDH-HRCP Interview, Islamabad, 2 February 2026.

49 FIDH-HRCP Interview, Karachi, 10 March 2026.

50 FIDH-HRCP Interview, Lahore, 20 February 2026.


A man walks in front of the Supreme Court of Pakistan in Islamabad, ICT. © Farooq Naeem / AFP

In March 2024, six judges of the Islamabad High Court addressed a letter to members of the SJC, including then-Chief Justice Qazi Faez Isa, alleging grave instances of intelligence agencies pressuring judges, including through instances of abduction and torture of relatives of judges and surveillance inside their homes.[51] A commission of inquiry was formed a few days later to investigate the allegations,[52] although the only judge appointed to it withdrew soon after and was never replaced. In April 2024, the Chief Justice of Pakistan took up the matter in *suo motu* proceedings before a larger bench, which had only held one hearing as of the publication of this report.

### 3.3.2 Perks and privileges

Appointments and promotions within the judiciary, as well as perks and privileges, are also used as leverage to ensure that judges are kept in check. Several interviewees also noted that the threat of withdrawing or decreasing pensions for retired judges was used as leverage to keep them silent on the issue of the erosion of judicial independence.

**Salaries of judges**

In 2008, the basic salaries of judges of the lower judiciary were increased four-fold, in order to curb incentives for corruption that had risen as a result of excessively low salaries.[53] District and Sessions judges saw their basic salaries increased from PKR 28,000 per month (approximately EUR 280) to PKR 120,000 (approximately EUR 1,200) per month; additional District and Sessions judges from PKR 19,000 (approximately EUR 190) per month to PKR 76,000 (approximately EUR 760); senior civil judges from PKR 12,000 (approximately EUR 120) to PKR 48,000 (approximately EUR 480); and civil judges and magistrates from PKR 8,000 (approximately EUR 80) to PKR 32,000 (approximately EUR 320).[54] Since then, salary scales have been revised in 2017 and 2022, and Special Judicial Allowances – which can significantly increase basic pay – were unfrozen and revised in 2019 and 2021.

51 Dawn, *IHC judges detail 'brazen meddling' in letter to Supreme Judicial Council*, 27 March 2024, https://www.dawn.com/news/1824028/ihc-judges-detail-brazen-meddling-in-letter-to-supreme-judicial-council.

52 Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, *PR No. 230 Press Release*, 28 March 2024, https://pid.gov.pk/site/press_detail/24863.

53 Nation, *Three-fold increase in judges' salaries*, 17 June 2008, https://www.nation.com.pk/17-Jun-2008/threefold-increase-in-judges-salaries.

54 These conversions to Euros were calculated using the average exchange rate for 2008.

The salaries of High Court judges were also revised and increased over the years. In 2024, it was reported the salaries and other allowances of High Court judges had been increased, with the "house rent" increasing from PKR 65,000 (approximately EUR 220) to PKR 350,000 (approximately 1,085), and the Superior Judicial Allowance from PKR 342,431 (approximately EUR 1,060) to PKR 1,090,000 (approximately EUR 3,390) – bringing the total pay, including basic salary, to around PKR 2,000,000 (approximately EUR 6,770).[55]

Superior court judges have increasingly received perks and benefits, such as subsidised land plots in housing developments [see *Case Study: Federal Government Employees Housing Authority* below] and luxury cars, which many interviewees believed was done purposefully by the government in order to ensure compliance by these judges, particularly in political and human rights-related cases.

One lawyer told FIDH and HRCP: "Doling out plots is a form of corruption. It's the state endowing its largesse upon groups that are in a position to influence it or create problems for it. This whole idea of the government doling parcels of land to army officers or judicial officers or lawyers is quite clearly designed to influence their conduct."[56]

**Case Study: Federal Government Employees Housing Authority**

In many instances, judges sit on benches making decisions in cases in which they have direct or indirect personal or financial interests – including in relation to land and housing allotments. Conflict of interests are rarely, if ever, disclosed, or used as a justification to recuse a judge from a case. This trend is especially exemplified in litigation over housing schemes, of which judges of the superior judiciary are beneficiaries.

The Federal Government Employees Housing Authority (FGEHA) plans and develops housing schemes under the authority of the Ministry of Housing & Works for federal government employees in Islamabad and other major cities.[57] In 2015, FGEHA began development of a housing society in sectors F-14 and F-15 of Islamabad, developed on lands acquired under the 1894 Land Acquisition Act (LAA), under which land is only meant to be acquired for public uses with a strong public interest. FGEHA eventually published a list of successful beneficiaries of the scheme that included serving and retired superior court judges and every judge of the Islamabad district judiciary, including judges who had been previously dismissed after disciplinary proceedings or who had resigned.[58]

In 2016, litigation was initiated in relation to the acquisition proceedings under the LAA, whereby landowners argued that the proceedings should have been undertaken under the 1960 Capital Development Authority Ordinance and that the development of a housing scheme did not constitute a "public purpose" as defined under the law.[59]

55 Dawn, *Govt increases perks, privileges of high court judges, 6 November 2024,* https://www.dawn.com/news/1870266. These conversions to Euros were calculated using the average exchange rate for November 2024.

56 FIDH-HRCP Interview, Karachi, 20 February 2026.

57 Although FGEHA was initially established to provide housing for federal government employees, plot allotments were extended to superior court judges in 1999, following a ruling by Justice Nawas Abbasi at the Lahore High Court; Justice Abbasi was later allotted a plot under a FGEHA scheme. See: Dawn, *Allotment of more than one plot to bureaucrats, judges illegal: IHC, 28 August 2021,* https://www.dawn.com/news/1643028.

58 Dawn, *IHC strikes down subsidized plots for judges, bureaucrats*, 4 February 2022, https://www.dawn.com/news/1673173. The allotment was made pursuant to a policy revised by the federal government in 2021, which changed the allotment process from "first come first served" to one based on age and seniority in service.

59 Separate litigation was also initiated by unsuccessful applicants to an earlier housing scheme, who argued that they should have been given priority for housing in the F-14 and F-15 sectors under the older first-come, first-serve policy.

In 2018, the Islamabad High Court ruled that the acquisition under the LAA had been illegal. However, in 2020 the decision was overturned by the Supreme Court, which held that the acquisition under the LAA was legal and that acquiring land for a housing scheme constituted a public purpose.[60]

A ruling by the Islamabad High Court in February 2022 that the allotment of subsidised plots of land in sectors F-14 and F-15 was illegal,[61] was overturned in November 2024 by the Supreme Court, which directed the Islamabad High Court to review the case.[62] No further action has been taken by the courts with regard to this case as of the publication of the report.

This case made blatant the lack of safeguards against personal and institutional conflict of interests within the judiciary, with the Supreme Court providing judicial backing to a scheme in which Supreme Court judges are potential beneficiaries (or beneficiaries of similar schemes run by FGEHA).

### 3.3.3 Politicisation of bar associations

Although increasing salaries, perks and privileges has been justified as an anti-corruption measure to reduce incentives for bribery, it has made judicial appointments much more attractive, giving rise to increased competition and lobbying for judicial appointments among the bar associations. Many interviewees pointed to the increasingly problematic role played by the bar associations, which were seen as politicised and no longer acting as independent bodies regulating the legal profession.

In addition to the role of lawyers in acting as middlemen in paying bribes (as described in Section 3.1 above), many interviewees raised the issue of the politicisation of lawyers' bodies, such as Bar Associations and Bar Councils, and their role in undermining judicial independence. One journalist told FIDH and HRCP that the capture of the judiciary "could not have been achieved without the collaboration of the Bar Association and the lawyers' groups, which wield a lot of power. Lawyers have been corrupted through various ways, including via the distribution of land [by the government] among lawyers at cheap rates."[63] Several interviewees spoke of the influence that the Pakistan Bar Association, as well as provincial bars, is able to wield, including to influence judges, as described in the sections above.

60 Supreme Court of Pakistan, *Civil Petition Nos. 767 of 2022, 857 to 868 of 2022, 1272 to 1274 of 2022, 1416 of 2022, 6616 of 2021, 4545 to 4549 of 2022, 4665 of 2022 & 4666 of 2022, and C.M.A. Nos 1631 of 2022, 104 of 2023, 2237 to 2248 of 2022 & 3503 of 2024*, https://www.supremecourt.gov.pk/downloads_judgements/c.p._767_2022.pdf.

61 The ruling argued that "participation of a court or its judges in any scheme of the FGEHA or accepting its benefits are contrary to the public interest and not in conformity with the impartiality and independence of the judiciary as an institution. […] It was definitely not permissible under the Constitution for a judge or a court to be seen as usurping the fundamental rights of the people at large and become complacent to a policy formulated in breach of public interest." Dawn, *IHC strikes down subsidized plots for judges, bureaucrats*, 4 February 2022, https://www.dawn.com/news/1673173.

62 The Supreme Court set aside the judgement primarily on the grounds of failure to ensure due process and on jurisdictional grounds, arguing that the High Court went beyond the scope of disputes raised by litigants.

63 FIDH-HRCP Interview, Islamabad, 2 February 2026.

# 4 - LACK OF ACCOUNTABILITY FOR CORRUPTION

Despite a relatively detailed and multi-layered legal and policy framework to address it [see Chapter 2], corruption remains rampant in Pakistan's judicial system in large part due to a weak implementation of accountability mechanisms that were seen by many interviewees as little more than a box-checking exercise. Moreover, the accountability mechanisms themselves have been politicised, resulting in a system that uses accountability for instances of corruption as a tool of political victimisation rather than to identify perpetrators and hold them accountable and to discourage further acts of corruption.

In addition, the widespread repression of freedom of expression in Pakistan has created a context in which it is becoming increasingly difficult and risky for media to report on corruption - especially among the members of judiciary - resulting in decreasing meaningful and effective scrutiny and accountability.

## 4.1 Empty accountability mechanisms

Many of the interlocutors interviewed by FIDH and HRCP, particularly lawyers and civil society representatives, expressed little hope that the existing accountability mechanisms were equipped to address corruption and misconduct within the judiciary. The MITs were seen as ineffective due to a variety of reasons, ranging from a lack of capacity to adequately investigate cases to internal pressures on judges sitting on the MIT (who are District and Sessions judges) to not hold their colleagues to account.

Part of the ineffectiveness of the accountability mechanisms was also attributed by some interviewees to the difficulties in proving corruption, particularly financial corruption, due to the lack of evidence that money had exchanged hands. One lawyer told FIDH and HRCP that while he knew of many people who had approached the MIT at the Karachi Court, the lack of evidence against sitting judges meant that the overwhelming majority of complaints were disregarded.[64] Another lawyer mentioned that many complaints before the MIT were not sufficiently well drafted, in part due to many lawyers being hired to file complaints without having the experience or understanding of how the mechanism works.[65]

Many interviewees noted that in the absence of hard evidence of financial corruption, it was difficult to use the judgements as evidence of corruption. They stressed that while some judgements could offer indications that a judge's decision had been influenced (via, for instance, the absence of defensible legal arguments), they also noted that it was often hard to distinguish between corruption on the one hand, and bias and incompetence on the other. Moreover, several interviewees also noted that inconsistent practices among judges regarding how they handle various questions of law (for instance, bail or matters related to the conduct of government authorities), and procedural matters (such as objections raised at the filing stage), made it difficult to identify when judicial decisions were taken as a result of corruption or undue influence, or due to judicial discretion or error.

Similarly, the SJC was seen by interviewees as being unwilling to investigate and take action regarding allegations of corruption against judges, except in politically-motivated cases [see *Section 4.2* below]. Many lawyers reported that proceedings before the SJC lacked transparency, and were generally perceived as an ineffective mechanism. One lawyer detailed a case in which several lawyers had filed a complaint against a judge of the Sindh High Court regarding his conduct towards lawyers and the fact that he had dismissed many cases without giving them an adequate

64 FIDH-HRCP Interview, Karachi, 10 March 2026.

65 FIDH-HRCP Interview, Karachi, 10 March 2026.

hearing, perceived to be as a result of corruption. The SJC failed to initiate an investigation into these allegations, and the judge in question was subsequently assigned to a different bench.[66]

These perceptions are compounded by a lack of transparency from the SJC itself, which only sporadically provides information or data regarding complaints and investigations. In July 2025, it was reported that the SJC was expected to meet to consider a reported backlog of two dozen pending complaints against judges of the superior judiciary – one rare instance of information disclosure regarding the SJC's investigations.[67]

The perceptions regarding accountability institutions related by people interviewed by FIDH and HRCP echoed findings from Transparency International's 2025 National Corruption Perception Survey, which found that 77% of respondents were "not satisfied with the government's efforts to combat corruption," citing the lack of transparency in investigations conducted by anti-corruption agencies, the absence of independent oversight of such agencies[68] and the use of these agencies for political victimisation [see *Section 4.2* below].

Corruption scandals involving anti-corruption agencies, including the FIA, have continued to erode public trust in the regulatory framework. According to Transparency International's 2025 survey, an overwhelming 78% of respondents nationwide believed that there should be accountability of anti-corruption bodies such as the NAB and the FIA. In January 2026, the FIA initiated cases against three officers of the National Cyber Crime Investigation Agency (NCCIA), which replaced the Cybercrime Wing of the FIA in 2025, on charges of corruption, bribery, extortion and abuse of authority. The officers were accused of abducting families and extorting millions of Rupees.[69] No progress has been reported in the case since then. In other similar cases involving NCCIA officials accused of using their position for exortion, officials were reported to have been allowed to resign from their position,[70] or given bail by the courts,[71] without the investigations ever being concluded or brought to trial.

## 4.2 Politicisation of corruption

Interviewees overwhelmingly agreed that the infrequent instances of accountability for corruption occurred when corrupt individuals found themselves on the wrong side of what many interviewees termed as "the military establishment." In this context, the accountability mechanisms, and particularly the FIA and the NAB, have been used to selectively target opposition figures (including judges seen as aligned with or sympathetic to the political opposition) rather than to tackle corruption systematically and impartially. One lawyer told FIDH and HRCP: "The motivation behind accountability proceedings is not to actually hold people accountable. Even if there is some underlying merit behind the allegations, that is lost behind the real motivations. That's why the process doesn't have any credibility."[72]

Similarly, the SJC was criticised by interviewees for not only being ineffective in tackling corruption and misconduct, but also for being manipulated by the military and intelligence agencies for their political reprisals. One case of this trend that was highlighted by interviewees was that of Judge Shaukat Aziz Siddiqui, who was removed from the Islamabad High Court by presidential order in 2018 after the SJC recommended his removal on grounds of "conduct unbecoming of a judge of a High Court and thus guilty of misconduct." A few months before his removal, Judge Siddiqui had

66 FIDH-HRCP Interview, Karachi, 6 March 2026.

67 Dawn, *Supreme Judicial Council to take up pending plaints against judges over weekend*, 9 July 2025, https://www.dawn.com/news/1922929.

68 For an analysis of the lack of oversight of the FIA, see: HRCP & World Organisation Against Torture, *Submission to the UN Committee Against Torture in view of the Committee's examination of Pakistan's second periodic review under Article 19 of the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment*, March 2026, https://hrcp-web.org/hrcpweb/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2026-Submission-to-CAT84.pdf.

69 Tribune, *FIA cybercrime officers accused of abducting families, extorting millions*, 23 January 2026, https://tribune.com.pk/story/2588538/cybercrime-watchdog-caught-in-corruption-web.

70 Dawn, *Three accused NCCIA officials resign as FIA probe into bribery case drags on*, 17 December 2025, https://www.dawn.com/news/1961674.

71 Dawn, *NCCIA ex-additional director gets bail in Ducky Bhai case*, 17 March 2026, https://www.dawn.com/news/1982779.

72 FIDH-HRCP Interview, Karachi, 6 March 2026.

accused the intelligence agencies of being involved in corrupt practices and manipulating judicial processes, as well as committing human rights abuses.[73]

**Case against Justice Naqvi**

In a rare case of a superior judge being held accountable for corruption, in October 2023, the SJC issued a show-cause notice[74] against Supreme Court Justice Syed Mazahar Ali Akbar Naqvi after 10 complaints had been filed against him alleging he kept assets beyond known sources of income, misconduct and abuse of judicial office.[75] One complaint was notably filed by the PML-N after audio leaks emerged in which Justice Naqvi could be heard discussing cases with former Punjab Chief Minister Parvez Elahi.[76] Other allegations argued that Justice Naqvi was "approachable and had cases fixed before him and provided relief in such cases" and he had acquired several properties at below market price.

In November 2023, Justice Naqvi challenged the SJC's show-cause notice, arguing in his petition that the complaints filed against him with the SJC were politically motivated. However, Justice Naqvi was found guilty of misconduct by the SJC in March 2024,[77] after which he was removed from office by the President.

However, several interviewees cited the case of Justice Naqvi as an example of a judge who was only held accountable for his corrupt behaviour once he had fallen out of favour with the federal government and the military. One lawyer told FIDH and HRCP: "Everyone knew he was corrupt. He thought that he had done so much dirty work for the military, that he could make as much money as he could and that nobody would be bothered."[78]

A journalist explained to FIDH and HRCP: "Unfortunately in Pakistan, journalists are mostly fed corruption stories by the powerful intelligence agencies, which belong to the military. [Although] those stories are truthful, they are targeting the politicians most of the time, and particularly those politicians and political parties which are against the role of military in politics."[79] This ability to control the corruption narrative in the media provided the intelligence agencies and the military leverage, enabling them to decide who to expose, and when.

## 4.3 Lack of protection for whistleblowers

The lack of effectiveness of the accountability mechanisms is compounded by a fear of backlash, if instances of corruption or other forms of misconduct are reported through these mechanisms, or in public forums.

The majority of lawyers interviewed by FIDH and HRCP agreed that while it was fairly common to discuss instances of corruption and misconduct with colleagues in informal settings, reporting such

73 France 24, *Pakistani judge removed over rare public criticism of ISI*, 11 October 2018, https://www.france24.com/en/20181011-pakistani-judge-removed-over-rare-public-criticism-isi.

74 Under Section 182 of the PPC, public servants against whom a report or complaint has been lodged are provided with an official record of the allegations made against them (the show cause notice) and are granted an opportunity to explain their position in relation to those allegations before any legal or disciplinary action is taken against them.

75 Dawn, *Supreme Judicial Council issues show-cause notice to SC judge Mazahar Ali Naqvi*, 27 October 2023, https://www.dawn.com/news/1784203.

76 The News, *'Audio leaks': PML-N Lawyers Forum files reference in SJC against Justice Naqvi*, 5 March 2023, https://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/1046577-audio-leaks-pml-n-lawyers-forum-files-reference-in-sjc-against-justice-naqvi.

77 Supreme Judicial Council, *In re: Justice Sayyed Mazahar Ali Akbar Naqvi, Judge, Supreme Court of Pakistan*, 2024 SCMR 880.

78 FIDH-HRCP Interview, Lahore, 20 February 2026.

79 FIDH-HRCP Interview, Islamabad, 2 February 2026.

instances formally in relation to specific cases - and especially in ongoing proceedings - was much more risky and was likely to result in negative consequences for their cases and clients.

In addition, journalists interviewed by FIDH and HRCP spoke of the increasing difficulties in reporting about instances of corruption, in part due to new laws – such as PECA and its recent amendments, and the 2024 Punjab Defamation Act – that have made journalists more vulnerable to reprisals and judicial harassment. Journalists also spoke of the lack of a witness protection framework and the use of threats of defamation suits or other false criminal allegations as deterrents to reporting about corruption and related issues. One lawyer told FIDH that the FIA and the NCCIA had began to bring cases against the media to protect judges "in their camp."[80]

A journalist told FIDH and HRCP that, as a result of an increasing number of military personnel being appointed to civilian government positions, the risks of reporting on corruption within these institutions had increased: "It becomes not only difficult but dangerous to report about corruption in Pakistan. It is a crime to report about the military because you can be charged under new laws for being anti-state, anti-army, for supporting terrorist narratives."[81]

This reluctance to report on, or investigate, corruption takes place in a context of increased repression of freedom of expression and of any criticism of the state or its actions. The increasing pliability of judges to the executive and military institutions, combined with a lack of accountability for corrupt behaviour and misconduct, has resulted in a growing use of judicial harassment, including by using repressive laws, to intimidate HRDs and silence dissent.

Instead of acting as a check on the use of these laws against HRDs, the courts are increasingly unwilling to protect fundamental rights and enable the use of laws and judicial mechanisms to commit human rights abuses.

80 FIDH-HRCP Interview, Karachi, 20 February 2026.

81 FIDH-HRCP Interview, Islamabad, 2 February 2026.

**Case study: Judicial harassment of Imaan Mazari**

In an example of how the erosion of judicial independence has contributed to shrinking civic space, in August 2025, the NCCIA filed a complaint under PECA against human rights lawyer Imaan Zainab Mazari-Hazir, alleging that she had made social media posts "aligned with hostile terrorist groups." Another human rights lawyer, Hadi Ali Chattha, was targeted in the same case, on accusations of reposting the alleged offending posts. Mazari has long been critical of the security establishment on social media, and has represented Baloch activists and women human rights defenders, including Mahrang Baloch.[82]

In September 2025, an Islamabad special court issued non-bailable arrest warrants for Mazari and Chattha, and, on 30 October 2025, formal charges were filed under PECA. On 11 December 2025, the Supreme Court stayed all proceedings at the trial court pending the Islamabad High Court's ruling on petitions that had been filed before it regarding the trial's procedural legality.[83] Nevertheless, both Mazari and Chattha were convicted on 24 January 2026 and sentencedd to 17 years in prison.

In an illustration of the arbitrary nature of trial scheduling in Pakistan, hearings in Mazari's case before her conviction were repeatedly scheduled on short notice for the benefit of the state, giving little opportunity for her legal team to prepare her defense adequately.

However, since their conviction, hearings to consider their petitions for a suspension of their sentence and their appeals against their convictions have twice been removed from the court schedule by the Islamabad High Court.[84] On 12 May 2026, the Supreme Court issued written directions to the Islamabad High Court to decide on the petition for a suspension of the sentence within two weeks.[85] On 1 June 2026, the Islamabad High Court yet again adjourned proceedings after the prosecution failed to appear.[86]

82 See: FIDH et al, *Open Letter: Pakistani authorities must end crackdown on Baloch human rights defenders*, 27 May 2025, https://www.fidh.org/en/region/asia/pakistan/pakistan-the-authorities-must-end-crackdown-on-baloch-human-rights.

83 FIDH et al, *Pakistan: End Judicial Harassment of Human Rights Lawyer Imaan Zainab Mazari-Hazir and Hadi Ali Chattha*, 15 December 2025, https://www.fidh.org/en/region/asia/pakistan/pakistan-end-judicial-harassment-of-human-rights-lawyers-imaan-zainab.

84 Voice PK, *IHC cancels causelist for Imaan & Hadi bail; Family cries foul over judicial delays*, 3 June 2026, https://voicepk.net/2026/06/ihc-cancels-causelist-for-imaan-hadi-bail-family-cries-foul-over-judicial-delays/.

85 Dawn, *SC directs IHC to decide Imaan, Hadi's pleas against sentence within two weeks*, 12 May 2026, https://www.dawn.com/news/1999649.

86 Tribune, *IHC adjourns Imaan Mazari, Hadi Chattha sentence suspension pleas until June 4*, 1 June 2026, https://tribune.com.pk/story/2610869/ihc-adjourns-imaan-mazari-hadi-chattha-sentence-suspension-pleas-until-june-4.

# 5 - IMPACT OF JUDICIAL CORRUPTION ON HUMAN RIGHTS

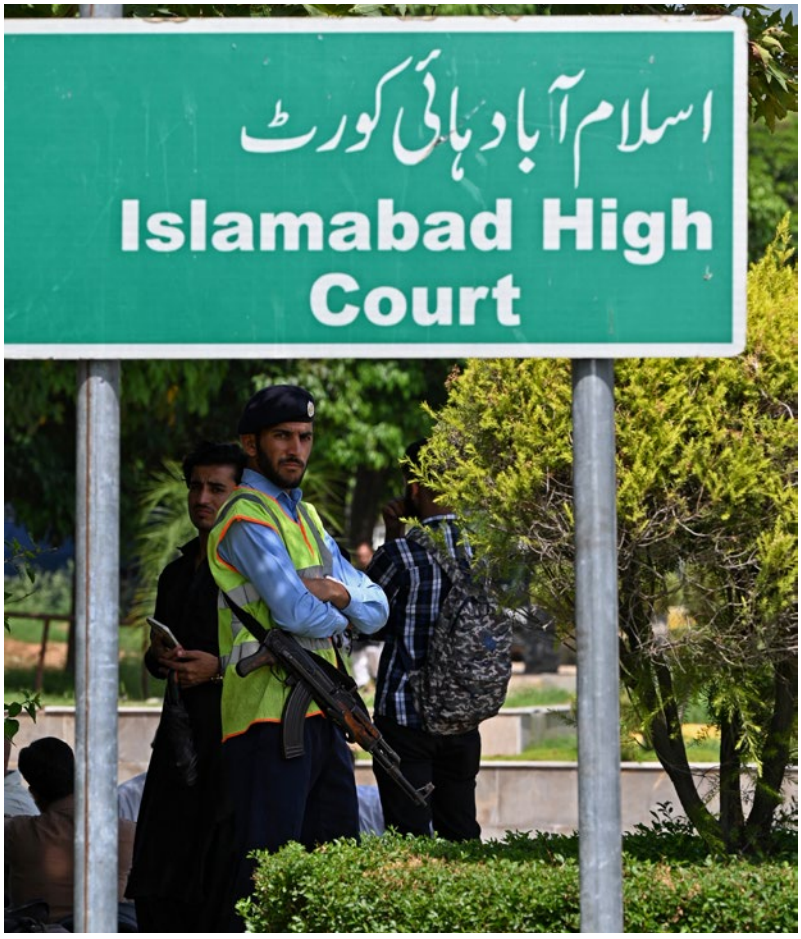
Widespread corruption within the Pakistani judiciary has a notable impact on the realisation and protection of human rights, particularly the rights to a fair trial and equal access to justice, and in relation to access to justice in cases related to human rights violations and in cases targeting HRDs.

Corruption and nepotism, as described in Chapter 3, also have a significant impact on women's representation in the judiciary, particularly the higher judiciary.

These findings inscribe themselves in the growing consensus that corruption, and particularly grand corruption, is closely linked with the deprivation of human rights, and creates an enabling environment for the commission of human rights violations.[87]

## 5.1 Rights to due process and equality before the law

Judicial corruption directly impacts the realisation of the right to a fair trial and equality before the law. The right to a fair trial includes the right to a fair and public hearing by a competent and independent tribunal, and the right to proceedings without undue delays.[88] With regard to criminal courts, the rights to the presumption of innocence and the right to adequate legal representation are hindered by the widespread incidence of corruption in the criminal justice system.




A member of the Pakistani security forces stands guard outside the Islamabad High Court © Farooq Naeem / AFP

87 OHCHR, *Corruption and Human Rights: A Practical Guide*, December 2025, https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/tools-and-resources/corruption-and-human-rights-practical-guide.

88 As defined under Article 14 of the ICCPR and Article 10A of the Pakistani Constitution.

As described in Chapter 3, the principle of equality before the courts[89] has been severely compromised by corruption in its various forms. Litigants, including defendants who do not have sufficient financial resources and/or social connections, are unable to overcome the barriers to the justice system. Their inability to afford to pay for "extra services," the fact that their lawyers are not heard equitably by judges (contravening the principle of equality of arms)[90] and their inability to influence judgements via their community or social connections, result in a situation where litigants from low-income communities or groups are more negatively impacted by endemic corruption.

The right to proceedings without undue delays is severely impacted by the backlog, which, as explained in Chapter 2, is both a cause and consequence of corruption. Litigants who cannot afford to pay bribes to have hearings promptly scheduled (either at the trial phase or at the appellate stage) may find themselves entangled in proceedings for years. In criminal cases, this often translates in excessively long periods of pre-trial detention, and years before cases reach the Supreme Court. Similarly, litigants in cases where the opposing party has greater resources to ensure that the case is left lingering in the system also often find themselves waiting for years for a judicial examination of the case.

The majority of those interviewed, and particularly those who provided legal counsel to disadvantaged groups, agreed that endemic corruption in the judiciary made it more difficult for low-income groups to access justice, as they did not have sufficient resources to pay bribes or otherwise influence judicial processes. One civil society activist who works on labour rights told FIDH and HRCP that the labour courts were very heavily influenced by employers, who had resources to hire lawyers who were able to leverage their connections in the courtroom and yield political and monetary influence, making it difficult for workers from low-income communities to access justice equitably.[91]

### 5.1.1 Access to justice for minorities

Ethnic and religious minorities continue to face rampant discrimination in Pakistan - issues that are compounded by the fact that they also come from low-income communities.

Many of the victims in cases targeting Christians, for example, are sanitation workers or daily labourers, meaning that their resources to pay legal representation with necessary social and political connections or to pay bribes are very limited, if not absent, in effect widening the gap in access to justice.[92] One journalist described how people often took loans, including from loan sharks, to pay court officials or the police.[93]

Corruption in the criminal justice system has had particularly negative impacts on religious minorities whose members have been accused of blasphemy, which have notably increased over the past several years. According to data collected by the National Commission for Human Rights of Pakistan, 787 prisoners were detained under charges of blasphemy in 2024 (as of 25 July 2024), compared to 213 in 2023, 64 in 2022, nine in 2021, and 11 in 2020.[94] In January 2024, a report by the Special Branch of the Lahore police detailed how a gang had been using social media and messaging groups to entrap youth and subsequently file blasphemy cases via the FIA.[95] The report's findings

89 See: UN Human Rights Committee, *General comment No. 32 – Article 14: Right to equality before courts and tribunals and to a fair trial*, 23 August 2007, UN Doc. CCPR/C/GC/32, https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/606075?ln=en&v=pdf.

90 The UN Human Rights Committee defines equality of arms in General comment No. 32 as ensuring "the same procedural rights are provided to all the parties unless distinctions are based on law and can be justified on objective and reasonable grounds, not entailing actual disadvantage or other unfairness to the defendant." See: UN Human Rights Committee, *General comment No. 32 – Article 14: Right to equality before courts and tribunals and to a fair trial*, 23 August 2007, UN Doc. CCPR/C/GC/32, https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/606075?ln=en&v=pdf.

91 FIDH-HRCP Interview, Karachi, 9 March 2026.

92 FIDH-HRCP Interview, Lahore, 20 February 2026.

93 FIDH-HRCP Interview, Lahore, 20 February 2026.

94 National Commission for Human Rights, Pakistan, *NCHR Investigation into Blasphemy Cases: October 2023 to October 2024*, October 2024, https://nchr.gov.pk/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Blasphemy-Report-Oct-2024.pdf.

95 Although the report has not been made publicly accessible by the authorities, a leaked version of the report is available here: https://www.scribd.com/document/777693081/Special-Branch-Report-on-Blasphemy-Business.

were echoed in a report by the NHRC,[96] as well as by a 2025 report by Human Rights Watch, which detailed how blasphemy accusations were levelled for economic motivations, including many cases in which police officials engaged in corrupt practices (such as demanding payment of bribes from victims to not file FIRs in false cases).[97]

In cases of blasphemy, corrupt practices by the police or court officials are even less likely to be addressed by judges, making religious minorities more vulnerable to these practices and miscarriages of justice. As several interviewees told FIDH and HRCP, in blasphemy cases, paying bribes to influence the police or court officials often had little impact, as the public pressure on the police and judges to ensure convictions was high.

One journalist told FIDH and HRCP: "Overall, the sentiment on the street is that there is no justice for the poor and weak people."[98] He explained that people targeted by blasphemy accusations were aware of the extremely high (95%) conviction rate in these cases as a result of pressures on the judges, and had little hope that their case would go a different way. This pressure on judges – primarily from religious extremists – was also noted by one lawyer as the reason why judges presiding over blasphemy cases, particularly at the district court level, are almost never willing to address obvious evidentiary irregularities (such as document tampering and contradictory evidence).[99]

A former Supreme Court judge told FIDH and HRCP: "Cases linger in the criminal justice system because the victims are voiceless."[100] This trend is exemplified by the case of Junaid Hafeez, an academic from Punjab Province, who was arrested by the police in March 2013 for allegedly posting blasphemous content on Facebook. His trial lasted almost seven years, with hearings being repeatedly delayed, and in December 2019 he was sentenced to death under Section 295-C of the PPC.[101] As of the publication of this report, his appeal had still not be heard – over 13 years since his original arrest.

Several interviewees noted that anti-minority and anti-poor bias was also apparent in the tone and language used by judges in the judgements. For example, one lawyer spoke of a judgement in a case she had been hired for, in which the trial court judgement claimed that Christians were likely to falsely accuse Muslims of crimes to justify the acquittal of a Muslim defendant accused of committing a crime against a Christian minor. As she further explained to FIDH and HRCP: "There is a clear anti-poor bias in the judiciary and there is a perception that people from those [poor] communities are engaged in some sort of crime or will be in the future."[102] This bias also makes it more difficult for victims of violations, such as torture in police custody or the denial of fair trial rights, to obtain justice, as they often face a hostile judge and courtroom environment.

### 5.1.2 Access to justice for women

Corruption and related forms of judicial misconduct also negatively impact women's ability to access judicial processes equitably. Although interviewees did not specifically opine that women were more likely to encounter corruption in the judicial system as a result of their gender, women - especially those from minority communities - face multiple layers of discrimination, and are more likely to be unable to seek redress for acts of corruption or other forms of misconduct.

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96 National Commission for Human Rights, Pakistan, *NCHR Investigation into Blasphemy Cases: October 2023 to October 2024*, October 2024, https://nchr.gov.pk/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Blasphemy-Report-Oct-2024.pdf.

97 Human Rights Watch, *"A Conspiracy to Grab the Land": Exploiting Pakistan's Blasphemy Laws for Blackmail and Profit, 2025*, https://www.hrw.org/report/2025/06/09/conspiracy-grab-land/exploiting-pakistans-blasphemy-laws-blackmail-and-profit.

98 FIDH-HRCP Interview, Lahore, 20 February 2026.

99 FIDH-HRCP Interview, Lahore, 20 February 2026.

100 FIDH-HRCP Interview, Islamabad, 3 February 2026.

101 Human Rights Watch, *Pakistan: Quash Longstanding Blasphemy Case*, 26 February 2026, https://www.hrw.org/news/2026/02/26/pakistan-quash-longstanding-blasphemy-case.

102 FIDH-HRCP Interview, Karachi, 6 March 2026.

Several interviewees noted that many judges had an apparent misogynist attitude, similarly reflected in their behaviour in the courtroom. One lawyer, reflecting on the situation in family courts, told FIDH and HRCP: "Judges don't create a welcoming space for women. Judges allow the other side to ask a lot of invasive questions."[103] Another lawyer told FIDH and HRCP: "Victims [of gender-based violence] would never choose the path of bringing their case to court; they only do it when they have no other remedy."[104] These dynamics create a situation where women are reluctant to engage in judicial proceedings, including to seek accountability for corruption or misconduct, because they have witnessed a judicial system that does not address their claims.

## 5.2 Torture and capital punishment

Although corruption is not necessarily a cause of torture, there is a strong link between the two, as corruption often creates a context that incentivises the use, or threat of, torture to elicit bribes.

Torture in police custody remains prevalent in Pakistan.[105] One journalist told FIDH and HRCP: "Most of the confessions are elicited through torture, that's a fact."[106] In many instances, detainees or their family members bribe – or attempt to bribe – the police to avoid being tortured. A journalist explained how, despite bribery being largely ineffective in blasphemy cases, family members still attempted to bribe the police at least to prevent their relatives accused of blasphemy from being tortured.[107]

In its 2026 Concluding Observations on the Pakistan's second periodic report, the UN Committee against Torture noted that there was still "consistent reports indicating that persons in custody are subjected to torture or ill-treatment [...] often as a method of coercion to extract confessions or to punish or intimidate persons accused of terrorism or real or perceived political opponents and critics of the Government," and that there was a "reported lack of accountability [...] which contributes to a climate of impunity."[108]

As described in FIDH's and HRCP's 2019 report on capital punishment in Pakistan,[109] there is a strong link between corruption, torture, and the use of capital punishment: capital cases are often based on witness testimonies and forced confessions, the latter almost always extracted under torture. Individuals who are thus able (financially or because of inherent biases) to avoid being tortured, are then less likely to confess, meaning that the likelihood of conviction is much lower.

## 5.3 Gender equality in the judiciary

Corruption and its related aspects are a contributing factor to the under-representation of women in the Pakistani judiciary, creating conditions where men are favoured and women have fewer opportunities to maneuver the system.

Interviewees described that it was very difficult for women to become successful in the legal profession. One female lawyer told FIDH and HRCP: "It's a boy's club almost entirely. It's difficult for women to climb up this ladder of aspiration."[110]

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103 FIDH-HRCP Interview, Karachi, 6 March 2026.

104 FIDH-HRCP Interview, Peshawar, 4 February 2026.

105 Some interviewees expressed that police violence and torture was not as prevalent in all provinces, notably that the police were less violent in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province compared to Punjab and Sindh Provinces. Police in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province is however regularly implicated in excessive use of force and alleged to commit human rights violations, including extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances; see: Dawn, *PHC rules extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances menace to rule of law*, 17 January 2026, https://www.dawn.com/news/1967357.

106 FIDH-HRCP Interview, Lahore, 20 February 2026.

107 FIDH-HRCP Interview, Lahore, 20 February 2026.

108 UN Committee against Torture, *Concluding observations on the second periodic report of Pakistan*, UN Doc. CAT/C/PAK/CO/2, 29 April 2026, https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CAT%2FC%2FPAK%2FCO%2F2&Lang=en.

109 FIDH & HRCP, *Punished for Being Vulnerable: How Pakistan executes the poorest and the most marginalized in society*, October 2019, https://www.fidh.org/en/issues/death-penalty/pakistan-poor-and-marginalized-suffer-disproportionately-from-capital.

110 FIDH-HRCP Interview, Karachi, 6 March 2026.

As of early 2024, only 40,000 (or 17%) of the 230,879 lawyers enrolled in Provincial Bars were women.[111] One legal academic noted that due to cultural dynamics, it was much easier for a male lawyer to approach a male judge, rather than a female lawyer, making female lawyers less attractive to potential clients.[112]

Interviewees noted that it was particularly difficult for female lawyers to gain leadership positions within the bar associations and councils, as a result of having little political backing. This in turn made the appointment of women to the superior judiciary more unlikely, because the SJC tends to appoints to judicial positions lawyers with whom they are already familiar and who have influence within the Bar Association.

As a result of these dynamics, women remain drastically underrepresented in the superior judiciary. Only seven (or 5%) of 126 judges in the upper judiciary (including the Supreme Court, the Federal Shariat Court and the five High Courts) are women. The first two (and only) female Supreme Court judges, Justice Ayesha Malik and Justice Musarrat Hilali, were appointed in 2022 and 2023, respectively.[113]

111 Law & Justice Commission of Pakistan, *Women in the Justice Sector: A summary report enlisting the data of Female Judges, Lawyers, Prosecution Officers and Female Human Resource in the C ourts of Pakistan*, January 2024.

112 FIDH-HRCP Interview, Lahore, 17 February 2026.

113 DW, *Pakistan: Why are there so few female judges?, 15 May 2024,* https://www.dw.com/en/pakistan-why-are-there-so-few-female-judges/a-69086765; Law & Justice Commission of Pakistan, *Women in the Justice Sector: A summary report enlisting the data of Female Judges, Lawyers, Prosecution Officers and Female Human Resource in the C ourts of Pakistan*, January 2024.

# 6 - CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

Determining the scale and pervasiveness of corruption within all levels of the Pakistani judiciary is a difficult task, including because of the challenges in documenting and proving individual cases of corruption. The evidence detailed in this report points to indicators of potential grand corruption, in particular due to the high-level actors involved and the widespread human rights impact.

## Recommendations to the Pakistani authorities

- Protect the independence of the judiciary and ensure accountability of the judiciary, including by repealing the 26th and 27th Constitutional Amendments.
- Address weaknesses in the administration of justice, including by:
    i. Eliminating discretion in the assigning and scheduling of cases, by giving power to the registrar and chief justices of superior courts with clear rules on which cases go to which bench and within specific timelines.
    ii. Increasing transparency regarding official court fees to ensure all litigants are aware of official costs and taxes for different services.
    iii. Ensuring all court hearing schedules are made available publically and easily accessible, including through online platforms.
    iv. Institutionalising accountability by publicising data on complaints received and actions taken on such complaints.
    v. Enacting policies relating to conflict of interests to bar relatives of sitting judges from appearing before the same judicial benches.
- Increase transparency, including by:
    i. Livestreaming Supreme Court hearings of public interest.
    ii. Regularly publishing data and trends related to investigations and complaints filed before accountability bodies, and in particular those pertaining to the judiciary, including the SJC.
    iii. Establishing timelines for inquiry into and decision-making in cases of allegations of misconduct against judges, including at the SJC.
    iv. Introducing legislation to ensure the constitutional guarantee to the right to information is extended to the judiciary and to increase transparency and accessibility of judicial institutions.
    v. Conducting public awareness and education campaigns aimed at increasing understanding and use of accountability mechanisms.
    vi. Strengthening accountability by mandating publication of asset declarations by judges at all levels of the judiciary, in line with existing requirements for civil servants.
- Ensure accountability in cases of corruption within the judiciary, including by prioritizing the investigation and prosecution of allegations of corruption by judicial actors.

- Protect whistleblowers by:
    i. Enacting a federal whistleblower protection law, in line with established international standards, that covers all provinces and comprehensively extends legal protections to individuals who report on corruption.
    ii. Repealing legislation that criminalises freedom of expression and freedom of the press, including PECA and defamation.
    iii. Enacting legislation to ensure strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPP) are not used against HRDs and other whistleblowers, by enabling courts to dismiss meritless claims at an early stage and shift litigation costs to the plaintiff.
- Provide effective remedies to victims of corruption, as reflected in the UN Basic Principles and Guidelines on the Right to a Remedy and Reparation, including restitution, compensation, rehabilitation, satisfaction and guarantees of non-repetition.
- Introduce legislation to a) regulate the functioning of civilian and military intelligence agencies; and b) hold intelligence agencies accountable for violations, including those that adverserly impact fair trial guarantees and due process.

## Recommendations to the European Union

- Expand the monitoring of Pakistan's compliance with its corruption-related GSP+ requirements to include corruption in the judiciary and the link between corruption and human rights violations.

## Recommendations to international financial institutions

- Introduce comprehensive recommendations to address systemic corruption in the judiciary within the Governance and Corruption Diagnostic Assessment published by the IMF, in order to develop structural benchmarks and programme conditionality for future staff-level agreements under the Pakistan Extended Fund Facility Programme.

## Recommendations to civil society and donors

- Increase documentation of human rights violations occurring as a result of corruption or facilitated by a corrupt environment, and integrate findings into submissions to UN Special Procedures, Treaty Bodies and the Universal Periodic Review (UPR).
- Undertake and fund litigation efforts to hold individuals accountable for corruption and to recover assets.
- Fund legal assistance programmes for whistleblowers.

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# Under the bench

## Mapping corruption risks in Pakistan's justice system

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