

Human Rights in Pakistan: Obligations, Challenges, and Compliance with International Standards

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Abstract

This article reviews the human rights concerns in Pakistan in relation to its international treaty obligations. The focus is to evaluate Pakistan's adherence to international human rights benchmarks with particular consideration for civil rights, women's issues, minorities, and children. With a qualitative approach using documents as primary sources, this research analyzes constitutional and legal documents, as well as institutional frameworks. This research Study reflects a large number of political problems such as instability, sociocultural factors, economic disparities, and ineffective governance that create hurdles in fulfilling these responsibilities. Although the government of Pakistan has recently made there some policy changes and legal adjustments, this work reveals a significant gap that exist between what Pakistan commits internationally and what is practiced nationally. In order to close the gaps in compliance with international standards, this article provides practical solutions for bolstering legal provisions pertaining to human rights advocacy and enforcement, improving institutional responsibility, and raising public awareness of human rights issues.

Key Words

Human rights, Pakistan, international obligations, compliance, civil liberties, minority rights, legal reform

Introduction

Human rights are the inherent rights and freedoms that every human being has simply for being human, representing civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights that are essential for assuring dignity, equality, and justice in societies throughout the world. In recent decades, human rights have emerged as a dominant element of international law, diplomacy, and global development. International institutions, such as the United Nations and the International Criminal Court, have been crucial agents toward furthering and monitoring human rights obligations worldwide.

As a member of the United Nations and a signatory of several international treaties, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), and Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), Pakistan's legal and moral obligations are to recognize and implement universal human rights standards in an effective manner. While these commitments exist and Pakistan's human rights obligations are formal and universal in nature, its human rights record continues to be erratic and frequently criticized by global actors monitoring human rights compliance. Reports and situations of political oppression, violence against women, violation of norms for the treatment of minorities, and use of child labor continue to reduce Pakistan's ability to realize its corner-cutting international obligation.

The disconnect between commitment and practice forms the core challenge that this study has set out to examine. As demonstrated through its constitution and numerous laws and policies, the state of Pakistan has a strong commitment to protecting fundamental rights. Nevertheless, the implementation trajectory lacks coherence because of a myriad of socio-cultural hindrances, political instabilities, economic discrepancies, and insufficient institutional capacity.

It is equally important to explore in-depth the implications of this disconnect on a national and international level. Nationally, it raises questions of rule of law and accountability and concerns around access to justice. Internationally, it influences unilateral or bilateral diplomatic engagement, regional trade agreements or development partnerships. This is particularly relevant for conditions that require compliance with human rights legislation to receive international development assistance or support.

Through a critical examination of Pakistan's human rights obligations and their accompanying obstacles to fulfillment, this research intends to add value to the broader discourse of accountability of the state, legal reform and social justice. It suggests that coherent policy implementation, sufficiently stronger institutional base and public participatory engagement are necessary to address even the apparent imbalance of a chasm between formal commitments and people's lived realities.

Challenges to Human Rights in Pakistan

Even with constitutional guarantees and international obligations, Pakistan encounters many challenges towards operationalizing basic human rights. These impediments stem primarily from structural barriers related to the political, socio-cultural, and economic aspects. The following discussion shows how each of these areas continues to hold Pakistan back from fulfilling its obligations globally.

1. Political Factors

Political instability has continued to be a recurring barrier to long-lasting human rights reform in Pakistan. Throughout the country's history, it has experienced military coups, long durations of authoritarian rule, and ongoing cycles of political polarization. Such disruptions create obstacles to democratic institutions, rule of law, and maintain the state's focus against ensuring citizens' welfare and rights.

The threat of military and increasing numbers of paramilitary actors dominate not only national political contests but also effectively prevent any civilian-led human rights agenda from being pursued. Specifically, emergency laws, counterterrorism activities, and armed conflicts have led to human rights breaches which include the state-authorized enforcement of disappearances, arbitrary arrests, and extrajudicial executions. In the name of national security, laws used to silence political dissent, peaceful protests, free speech, and a free press are employed and in an effect are in complete contradiction to international legal obligations set forth in the ICCPR and related treaties.

Furthermore, the weakened judiciary and rampant bureaucratic inefficiency continue to undermine public trust in legal protections. Political interference in the judicial process further weakens the enforcement of constitutional rights, rendering accountability difficult and implementation fragmented.

2. Socio-Cultural Factors

Human rights violations in Pakistan are made worse by the deeply embedded patriarchal values, religious conservatism, and ethnic hierarchies. In rural and tribal areas, customary behavior often supersedes constitutional protection and law, which is often why gender-based violence, honour killings, child marriages, and forced conversions are so prevalent.

Women and minorities are still disproportionately impacted by these practices. Although Pakistan ratified CEDAW and its Constitution contains provisions for the protection of minorities, the social and cultural opposition to their enforcement is significant. Religious minorities - Christians, Hindus, Ahmadis and others - often experience discrimination based on blasphemy laws and are subject to mob violence. Ethnonational groups like the Baloch or Pashtun also experience marginalization, invisibility and state scrutiny.

Attempts to establish legal reforms or to create public awareness efforts face pushback from influential local institutions. These institutions, which may be

feudal, clerical, or tribal in nature, see human rights norms as a threat to traditional authority.

3. Economic Factors

Widespread poverty, economic inequality, and weak public infrastructure present formidable barriers to human rights realization in Pakistan. The country's obligations under the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) require it to ensure the right to education, healthcare, employment, and an adequate standard of living. Yet economic constraints have limited the state's capacity to deliver on these commitments.

Millions of Pakistanis lack access to basic services such as clean water, quality education, and primary healthcare. Children are especially vulnerable, with child labor, malnutrition, and school dropouts prevalent across the country. Women in low-income communities face additional hurdles due to inadequate maternity care, wage discrimination, and restricted employment opportunities.

The lack of government investment in human development, coupled with institutional corruption and uneven resource distribution, deepens the divide between legal rights and lived realities. Economic policies often fail to target vulnerable populations, leaving large segments of society excluded from state protection and support.

This tripartite analysis underscores that Pakistan's human rights challenges are not simply administrative shortcomings but are rooted in systemic political, cultural, and economic dysfunction. Addressing these issues requires coordinated reform efforts that move beyond legislation to structural transformation.

Global Human Rights Context and Pakistan's Standing

Pakistan's human rights record must be assessed not only through a domestic lens but also in the context of global expectations and international legal obligations. As a signatory to several international treaties and a participant in global human rights forums, Pakistan is under continuous international scrutiny regarding its compliance. The interplay between external evaluations and domestic realities sheds light on the challenges of meeting universal standards in a complex national setting.

1. United Nations Framework and International Monitoring

Pakistan is party to core UN instruments, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the ICCPR, and the ICESCR. Through its participation in

the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) conducted by the UN Human Rights Council, Pakistan periodically reports on its progress and receives recommendations for reform. These reviews have repeatedly emphasized concerns over freedom of expression, judicial independence, protection of minorities, and women's rights.

While Pakistan has made some procedural improvements—such as forming human rights commissions and enacting gender-protection laws—its implementation gap remains a consistent theme in international reports. The tension between sovereignty and external monitoring is evident in Pakistan's responses, which often highlight national security concerns and socio-cultural sensitivities as limiting factors.

2. European Union and Human Rights Conditionality

The European Union (EU) has emerged as a key actor in shaping Pakistan's human rights behavior, primarily through the Generalized System of Preferences Plus (GSP+) trade arrangement. Under GSP+, Pakistan receives preferential access to EU markets on the condition that it adheres to 27 international conventions, including those on human rights, labor rights, and environmental protection.

Although this trade-linked conditionality has incentivized some legal reforms—especially regarding labor standards and gender legislation—the EU has frequently expressed concern over Pakistan's performance. Issues such as the misuse of blasphemy laws, restrictions on civil society organizations, and the lack of legal protection for minorities and women have been repeatedly flagged. The threat of suspension from GSP+ has occasionally catalyzed state-level responses, though often symbolic or incomplete in scope.

3. Global Rankings and Comparative Performance

International watchdogs such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and Freedom House consistently rank Pakistan low on key human rights indicators. Common points of concern include:

- Harassment and detention of journalists
- Arbitrary use of anti-terror laws
- Discrimination against religious and ethnic minorities
- Prevalence of gender-based violence
- Weak institutional accountability

Compared to democracies with stronger legal traditions, Pakistan fares poorly in enforcement and civic protections. However, it also shares structural and cultural constraints with other developing nations in South Asia, the Middle East, and Sub-Saharan Africa. This comparative perspective suggests that while Pakistan's challenges are severe, they are not unique—and thus potentially addressable through regional cooperation and targeted reforms.

This global context reinforces the importance of aligning domestic human rights policies with international standards, not only for legal and moral reasons but also for preserving diplomatic credibility and economic partnerships. The growing role of external actors as enforcers of accountability underscores the need for Pakistan to engage proactively with international human rights mechanisms rather than reactively defend against critique.

Policy Recommendations

To strengthen Pakistan's alignment with international human rights standards, the following targeted reforms are recommended:

1. Strengthen Legal and Judicial Infrastructure

- Enact comprehensive human rights legislation that explicitly protects vulnerable groups, particularly religious minorities, women, and children.
- Ensure judicial independence through structural reforms, strict merit-based appointments, and training programs for judges on human rights law.
- Establish specialized human rights benches in courts to ensure expedited and expert handling of rights-based cases.

2. Ensure Accountability and Oversight

- Empower independent human rights commissions with legal authority to investigate violations and issue binding recommendations.
- Establish civilian-led oversight mechanisms for law enforcement and security forces to address extrajudicial actions, enforced disappearances, and custodial abuse.
- Implement strict codes of conduct and disciplinary protocols for public officials involved in rights violations.

3. Promote Rights-Based Education and Awareness

- Integrate human rights education into national curricula at all levels to foster a culture of rights and responsibilities.
- Launch public awareness campaigns, particularly in rural and marginalized areas, to increase citizens' understanding of their legal rights and available redress mechanisms.

4. Empower Civil Society

- Remove legal and financial restrictions on non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society actors engaged in human rights advocacy.
- Provide protection and institutional support to human rights defenders, whistleblowers, and journalists under threat.

5. Fulfill International Obligations through Diplomatic Engagement

- Actively implement recommendations from UN human rights mechanisms, including the Universal Periodic Review and treaty bodies.
- Strengthen cooperation with the European Union by meeting GSP+ human rights compliance benchmarks.
- Establish a national reporting and coordination mechanism to ensure regular and accurate compliance with treaty commitments.

Conclusion

This study has critically examined Pakistan's human rights obligations in the context of its international commitments and domestic realities. While Pakistan has made progress in legal ratification and policy development, systemic challenges—rooted in political instability, socio-cultural resistance, and economic inequality—continue to hinder effective implementation.

The gap between Pakistan's treaty-based promises and the lived experiences of its citizens highlights the urgent need for structural reforms. Strengthening judicial independence, institutional accountability, civil society participation, and human rights education are essential for closing this gap.

Equally important is Pakistan's engagement with global frameworks, where compliance is not only a legal necessity but also a strategic imperative for sustaining international partnerships and economic development. By demonstrating genuine commitment to human rights, Pakistan can build a more just, inclusive, and globally respected society.

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