

World Watch Research

Pakistan: Background Information

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Copyright and sources

World Watch Research has divided up the previously named Full Country Dossier into two separate documents:

- Background country information (published annually in summer)
- Persecution dynamics (published annually in January).

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Map of country



Pakistan: Population (UN estimate for 2024)	Christians	Chr%
245,210,000	4,526,000	1.8

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

Recent history

Pakistan became an independent nation separate from India at the end of British colonial rule in 1947. In 1971 East Pakistan became the independent nation Bangladesh. The territory of Kashmir remains disputed with India to this day and in February 2019 both countries were involved in a violent skirmish across the unofficial (but in practice accepted) "Line of Control". The conflict flared up, when Pakistani militants from the group Jaish-e-Mohammed, which claimed immediate responsibility, attacked an Indian military convoy on 14 February 2019 and killed 40 people (Pulwama incident). India retaliated, but both sides avoided letting the conflict escalate further. However, in August 2019, the Indian government revoked the special status of Jammu and Kashmir, stripping them off their status as Indian

states and making them Union territories under the direct rule of Delhi instead. This step angered and provoked Pakistan, but so far, no action has been taken.

Pakistan has suffered from an unstable government system with three prolonged phases of military rule, with the last phase ending in 2008. The attacks in December 2014 on an army school in Peshawar, leaving 141 dead, led to a hasty amendment to the Constitution, re-introducing the death penalty and setting up special military courts for terrorism-linked cases, fulfilling the army's long-standing demands. Army and government are still executing a plan allegedly targeting Islamic militants.

A strain on relations with the USA has been caused by the Taliban government take-over in neighboring Afghanistan, which was [supported](#) by groups based in Pakistan (Gandhara, 21 June 2021). However, with the continuing string of attacks by the Pakistani Taliban, at least tacitly supported by Afghanistan, authorities and the army, which is still pulling the strings of politics behind the scenes, are reconsidering the wisdom of this policy. Army leaders had been content with Prime Minister Imran Khan in office taking the blame for the dire economic situation, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, but their patience came to an end when Khan tried to [influence and delay](#) military appointments, such as the Chief of Army Intelligence (ISI) (Reuters, 26 October 2021). On 11 April 2022, a no-confidence motion against Imran Khan passed and Shehbaz Sharif became the new Prime Minister (PM), immediately facing a barrage of challenges. A new army leader was announced at the end of November 2022: [Syed Asim Munir](#), a former chief of military intelligence (ISI), who had been ousted by former PM Imran Khan (Crisis Group, 27 December 2022). On 7 August 2023, Ex-PM Khan was [sentenced](#) to three years in prison on charges of corruption (Reuters, 7 August 2023). Voting for the 2024 general election took place as scheduled on 8 February 2024 and while independent candidates aligned with Imran Khan took most seats, the new government coalition consists of the main parties opposing him.

While Christians were encouraged by the final decision to acquit Asia Bibi and allow her to finally leave the country in May 2019, this ruling has not made their everyday life any easier. Christians face ubiquitous discrimination. They - like other religious minorities (and even Muslim minorities) - continue to be accused, arrested and tried for blasphemy. Young girls from the Christian and other minorities continue to be abducted, forcefully converted and married off. The government has by-and-large managed to keep violent Islamic groups in check, and has continued its appeasement policy towards certain radical Islamic groups. However, the fact that Muslim mobs [vandalized](#) churches and Christian homes in the Jaranwala District, Faisalabad, after a Christian was accused of blasphemy (Dawn, 16 August 2023) shows that it is not sufficient to simply try to control Islamic militants, when anti-minority and anti-Christian sentiments are deeply rooted in wider society.

Political and legal landscape

As mentioned above (in: *Recent history*), Prime Minister Imran Khan lost a no-confidence vote in 2022, the first PM in Pakistan's history to do so. On the other hand, his length in office confirms a typical factor of Pakistan's politics: Since independence, no prime minister ever served a full term. While there had been earlier talks about a no-confidence vote, only in March 2022 were the parties sufficiently confident they had the numbers. Imran Khan, who came to power in 2018 and had survived earlier attempts to sideline him, did not go down without a fight. He tried to pre-empt an attempted 'no confidence' vote in a [surprise move](#) on 2 April 2022, by dissolving parliament and calling for early

elections (New York Times, 3 April 2022). While political turmoil is certainly not unknown in Pakistan's history, Prime Minister Khan's move was unprecedented and the Constitutional Court decided that such action was unconstitutional; hence the Court re-instated parliament and the original no-confidence motion. Opposition politician Shehbaz Sharif was [elected](#) as his replacement on 11 April 2022 (Reuters, 11 April 2022).

Ousted former PM Khan resorted to the conspiracy theory that the no-confidence vote was the work of the USA acting behind the scenes and called his supporters to stage demonstrations. This narrative resonated well with his supporters. He is also known to be close to Islamist circles. While joining his anti-government convoy in Eastern Pakistan, Imran Khan was [shot at](#), receiving a leg-wound. His supporters saw this as an assassination attempt and blamed the government (Reuters, 4 November 2022). Just days earlier, Pakistan's election commission had ruled to [disqualify](#) him from holding public office for five years (CNN, 21 October 2022). In March 2023, a first [attempt at arresting](#) ex-PM Khan failed (when he was serving as opposition leader) and left several of his supporters and police wounded (Reuters, 15 March 2023).

Nawaz Sharif [returned from exile](#) and will doubtless become a more visible factor in politics again (CNN, 21 October 2023). The 8 February 2024 elections resulted in an [inconclusive vote](#), leaving the country with unclear options for political coalitions (Reuters, 12 February 2024). In what can be seen as being in defiance of the official ban on Imran Khan's PTI party, the largest group of candidates – gaining 93 seats in parliament – were the independents backed by Imran Khan. The PML-N came in as the largest recognized party with 75 seats, followed by the PPP with 54 seats. Imran Khan was already banned from running in the elections and received [two additional](#) prison sentences (of 10 and 14 years respectively) before the February voting began (Reuters, 31 January 2024). Just a few days after the elections PML-N and PPP cobbled together a ruling [coalition](#) (Dawn, 13 February 2024). However, this may not become the stable government Pakistan with its multiple challenges needs. It should also be noted that the representation of Christians falls far short of this minority's need, as a Catholic bishop recently explained (Asia News, 7 February 2024). It is therefore safe to say that there will be little to no improvement for the Christian minority in the country.

Islam plays a dominant role in every aspect of life. For example, according to the Constitution, every citizen has the right of free speech, which is, however, subject to the restrictions necessary in the interest of "the glory of Islam". Government and army alike have a long history of trying to distinguish between 'good' and 'bad' jihadists. It fights the latter and courts the former.

Since the introduction of the blasphemy laws in 1986, Christians have come under increasing pressure and are victims of roughly a quarter of all blasphemy accusations. In the protests against the acquittal of Asia Bibi in November 2018, the radical Islamic groups (headed by the *Tehreek-e-Labaik Pakistan* party -TLP) made a mistake (although it turned out not to be a fatal mistake, since such groups have the ability to lie low, re-structure and re-emerge after a while): They would have been forgiven for just calling for the downfall of the government and the killing of the judges. However, they also called for an uprising against the army and its chief as well. The army is regarded as one of the main pillars of power in Pakistan and is arguably the strongest one.

After 2022, it was hard to imagine that Pakistan's politics could become more volatile than they already were, but events in the last two years have shown that it is indeed possible. Such volatility affects

minorities seriously, especially religious minorities. Christians continue to be pushed to the margins of society; they still lack proper representation in politics and the Jaranwala mob attack in August 2023 has been a chilling reminder how vulnerable Christians are. Additionally, there are almost constant attacks against individuals, making it hard for Christians to feel safe and worship freely.

Gender perspective

The '[Global Gender Gap Report 2022](#)' published by the World Economic Forum revealed that Pakistan has shown a dismal performance in regards to gender parity. Pakistan's gender gap had broadened by 0.7 percentage points in the past year to 55.6 percent, but marginally increased to 56.4% in 2022; only Afghanistan fared worse. While it ratified the CEDAW convention in 1996, a [2020 CEDAW periodic report](#) (p.7) highlighted concerns about ongoing harmful practices, such as child marriage, forced marriage (often linked to cases of [forced conversion](#)) and so-called 'honor' crimes (ACN, 17 March 2023). Some Pakistani states continue to permit child marriage; in 2020, the Sindh High Court in Karachi ruled that Pakistani men may marry underage girls as long as they have had their first period ([Forbes, 1 March 2020](#)). Whilst rates are slowly declining, as of 2022, an estimated 18% of girls are married by the age of 18 according to Girls Not Brides Pakistan.

[Bride trafficking](#) along the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor is a big problem (Brookings Institution, March 2022). The Brookings report highlights cultural and religious differences between China and Pakistan and touches upon the concept of family honor in Pakistan. The report then goes on to state: "Offsetting this was the fact that many of the victims belonged to the Christian community of Pakistan — less surrounded by society's notions of honor, and less protected because they are marginalized. ... That most of the victims belonged to the poor and marginalized Christian community of Pakistan sadly made it easier for Pakistan to divert attention away from the issue without an ensuing public outcry." Thus, due to a lack of interest in the plight of the Christian minority, the whole issue has been quietly ignored by most government officials.

Although there is a law against domestic violence, implementation of the legislation is weak and marital rape is not criminalized. Similarly, whilst laws against honor killings were tightened in 2016 following the murder of Qandeel Baloch ([The Guardian, 17 May 2019](#)), an estimated 1,000 honor killings take place each year ([HRW 2023 Pakistan country chapter](#)). Divorce laws prevent women and girls from escaping an abusive situation. Under Sharia law, a man has the right to divorce his wife by *talaq* – a husband's right to dissolve the marriage by simply voicing his repudiation of her – whereas a woman may file for divorce through the courts. Following a divorce, women are usually granted custody of the children until they reach the age of 7, whilst guardianship remains with the father, and with it, decision-making power over the child. If the case is made that the child should be raised a Muslim however, it is likely that custody of the children will be given to the Muslim parent regardless of the child's age.

Religious landscape

Pakistan: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	4,526,000	1.8
Muslim	233,815,000	95.4
Hindu	3,413,000	1.4
Buddhist	131,000	0.1
Ethnic religionist	252,000	0.1
Jewish	920	0.0
Bahai	135,000	0.1
Atheist	11,700	0.0
Agnostic	357,000	0.1
Other	2,568,000	1.0
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

While Muslims make up more than 95% of the total population, by far the majority of them follow the Sunni tradition; Shiites make up less than 10% and the Ahmadi around 0.2%. (The exact percentages between Sunni and Shia are hotly debated).

The World Christian Database uses government censuses as one source among others and gives the current percentage of Christians in Pakistan as 1.8%. A new nationwide census was conducted in 2017, the first for 19 years. It included religious affiliation, and in June 2021, the government finally released the [religious statistics](#) (Pakistan Daily Times, 7 June 2021). The census shows a drop in the population’s percentage of Christians compared to 1998. According to the 2017 census, 1.27% of all Pakistani citizens were Christian, down from 1.59% in the 1998 census. (In comparison, the census shows that the Hindu minority grew in the same time from 1.6% to 1.73%.) These results come as a disappointment to the Christian minority and have caused several questions to be raised. The most obvious question is: Why did it take the Bureau of Statistics more than three years to publish results for a census that was held in 2017? It has also been questioned how well the census enumerators were trained in explaining the census and the religious affiliation section to the respondents. It should be noted that many Christians are poor and illiterate and many may well have been completely left out of the census. Many of these Christians do not see a reason for obtaining a National Identity Card or for registering their children. Finally, it is also possible that the percentage has been kept low for political reasons as has been seen happening to Christians in other Asian countries such as Myanmar.

On the other hand, there is currently a wave of emigration by better educated Christians, thus reducing the number of Christians in Pakistan.

The question of religion is a highly sensitive one and is very political. One decision connected to the census concerns whether (and how far) political representation of religious minorities will be increased at the national and state level; the most recent elections in July 2018 were still conducted according to the old system with poor representation. Radical Islamic groups will oppose every change of the status quo, just as they have already violently opposed all efforts to open discussions about reviewing the country's notorious blasphemy laws.

The data published by Pakistan's National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA) in March 2022 would seem to be [inconsistent](#) with the census data of 2017 (UCA News 9 June 2022), as has been [highlighted](#) by the Catholic Center for Social Justice Pakistan (CSJP). According to the 2017 census, there were 2.7 million Christians and 4.5 million Hindus in Pakistan, while NADRA (which is responsible for issuing identification documents) states that there are only 1.8 million Christians and 2.2 million Hindus. This is a very large discrepancy and has an impact on the socio-economic and political rights of the two main religious minorities. However, while the discrepancy can be partly explained by the use of different census categories, in both cases Christians are more concerned about their numbers being grossly underreported.

The seventh national population and housing census, which started in March 2023, has already faced [accusations](#) of being biased and of undercounting religious minorities for the reasons mentioned above, especially Christians (UCA News, 25 April 2023). It is, therefore, very unlikely that its results will shed any light on the real numbers on the ground.

Economic landscape

According to [World Bank Pakistan data](#) (accessed 24 June 2024):

Pakistan is classified as a lower middle income country.

- **GDP per capita:** 1,588.9 (2022)
- **GDP growth rate:** 4.7% (2022)
- **Remittances:** Remittances from citizens working abroad make up 8.1% of the national GDP (2022).
- **Inflation:** 19.9% (2022)
- **Poverty headcount ratio at \$2.15 a day:** 4.9% of the population (2018).

Even before the COVID-19 outbreak, Pakistan was already struggling to keep its economy afloat, not least because the long-term political friendship with the USA had cooled off. As this process was already tangible for some time, Pakistan looked for new sources of revenue and turned like many other countries eastwards. For a number of years, the country had begun to rely increasingly on China and the latter's willingness to invest in Pakistan in its "New Silk Road" framework ("One Belt, One Road"). China is investing up to 65 billion USD in the so called "China-Pakistan Economic Corridor" (CPEC) and the port city of Gwadar is one of the hubs the Chinese are building; in 2017 it was leased from the Pakistan government for 40 years. However, Pakistan's [cancellation](#) of a planned oil refinery in Gwadar, an investment of an estimated 10 billion USD and sometimes called the "crown jewel", may indicate second thoughts and a re-orientation of Pakistan politics, not just in the economy (Eurasia Review, 20

June 2021). Additionally, the [killing of two Chinese Christians](#) in Pakistan in May 2017 (close to the CPEC construction site) illustrates how challenging the situation is, as well as highlighting some of the opportunities and risks Christians face (China Aid, 29 June 2017). Since 2021 and up to the reporting period of WWL 2025, Chinese nationals have increasingly been targeted by the radical Muslim TTP and nationalist Baloch groups alike. China is reportedly considering deploying its own security forces to protect Chinese nationals - a request strongly opposed and [declined](#) in polite terms by Pakistan's government (Jamestown, 14 July 2023).

Pakistan cannot afford a complete cutting of ties with the USA nor with China, since it is clear that the country cannot go it alone economically. It has sought economic assistance (i.e. credit) from various countries after the USA refused to step in once again to support its long-term ally. In the end, the government turned back to the IMF, although it has already a long history of bail-outs from the IMF ([thirteen bail-outs](#) up to 2019, Reuters, 13 May 2019). While the strict economic conditions the IMF demands are hard to sell domestically, they seem to have been perceived as the best and possibly last option. With Pakistan seen as being on track with its economy again, another loan tranche was [granted](#) by the IMF in 2024 (Al-Jazeera, 30 April 2024).

Even before the bail-out had been negotiated, the World Bank summed up the economic and social challenges Pakistan is facing in its [Pakistan overview](#) (updated 2 April 2024):

- "The Government continues to face a challenging macroeconomic environment while maintaining progress towards macroeconomic stabilization and critical structural reforms. Significant downside risks include: i) policy uncertainty, which may undermine a coherent and timely policy response; ii) worsening external conditions, including unforeseen increases in global commodity prices and interest rates; and iii) risks associated with large domestic and external financing needs, especially in the context banking sector liquidity constraints. To manage these risks, it will be critical to adhere to sound overall economic management and buttress market sentiment, including through articulating and effectively implementing a clear strategy for economic recovery; constraining fiscal expenditures to the extent possible and carefully targeting any new expenditures; maintaining a tight monetary stance and flexible exchange rate; and remaining on-track with critical structural reforms, including those in the energy sector."

However, Pakistan has more reasons than just obtaining credit for having good relations with Jeddah; another reason is that the equivalent of more than six billion USD in the form of remittances annually is sent home by migrant workers. In a rare connection of human rights and economy, the European Parliament [publicly questioned](#) the justification for Pakistan's preferential status with the bloc (so-called "GSP plus"), given its dismal handling of blasphemy accusations, explicitly naming the Christian couple who were then swiftly released in June 2021 (AP News, 1 May 2021). Although Pakistani officials were quick to stress that no international pressure had influenced this decision, this is hardly credible. While monitoring missions for the GSP plus status continue to be sent to Pakistan and thus human rights continue to play a role, the European Union reportedly proposed to extend the status for another [four years](#) (Pakistan Today, 10 July 2023).

In its April 2024 [Development Update](#), the World Bank said the following about the risks and headwinds Pakistan's economy is facing:

- "With a tax-to-GDP ratio of only about 10.0 percent of GDP, Pakistan has been heavily reliant on domestic borrowing for fiscal financing. Growing exposure to the sovereign is exposing the banking sector to risks. Additional downside risks include growing policy uncertainties that could lead to weaker than expected business confidence, even more limited external financing, and therefore more pronounced macroeconomic vulnerabilities. Potential increases in world energy and food prices in the context of intensification of regional geopolitical conflicts, slower global growth, and tighter than expected global financing conditions pose additional risks to the macroeconomic outlook."

Pakistan has a strong population growth, most recently reflected by the nation's census in 2017, which put the annual growth at 2.4% (the World Bank's estimate was 1.9% for 2022, the CIA Factbook's estimate was 1.91% for 2023). This is especially true for urban areas, illustrated by Lahore, the country's second biggest city, which grew in population by 53% within 20 years. If these rates of growth continue, the country's population could double again over the next decades. This comes with big challenges as it is the younger generation in particular that lacks any real economic perspective. While the youth unemployment rate, as listed by the UNDP, is not particularly high at 4.7%, the percentage of youth aged 15-24 neither in school or employment stands at 31%. This is especially the case for ethnic and religious minorities. Child labor is rampant, bonded labor is particularly common in the province of Sindh, although numbers are hard to establish. The NGO, Borgen Project, gives an estimated total number of [12.5 million](#), but this cannot be verified (Borgen Project, 15 May 2017). More recent in-country estimations talk about [four million](#) bonded laborers (Dawn, 8 February 2021), but to this number children would have to be added. The whole population suffers greatly from these poor conditions, but minority groups (such as Christians) even more so. Many of them are day-laborers (for example in brick kilns) with treatment from employers often being arbitrary and violent. Women and children are especially vulnerable groups.

Gender perspective

Women are typically more economically vulnerable than men in Pakistan. Due to low [education rates](#) for girls (exacerbated by girls entering early marriages, impoverished communities and pressure from Taliban groups against girls receiving education beyond a certain level) many women do not work (Borgen Project, 2019). According to Georgetown ([GIWPS Pakistan profile](#) accessed 24 June 2024), nearly 75% of Pakistani men think it is unacceptable for women to have a paid job. Making it additionally challenging for women to gain economic independence, various inheritance laws discriminate against women. Considering these economic vulnerabilities, Christian women depend heavily on their husbands and families. Should this support be lost, they will likely fall into destitution, and converts may be forcibly married to a Muslim man. Divorcees are also economically vulnerable as there are no legal provisions for the division of matrimonial property and have very limited financial protection ([The Express Tribune](#), 20 February 2020).

Social and cultural landscape

According to the [World Factbook Pakistan](#) (accessed 24 June 2024):

- **Main ethnic groups:** Punjabi (44.7%), Pashtun (15.4%), Sindhi (14.1%), Saraiki (8.4%), Muhajirs (7.6%), Balochi (3.6%), other (6.3%)
- **Main languages:** Punjabi 38.8%, Pashto (alternate name, Pashtu) 18.2%, Sindhi 14.6%, Saraiki (a Punjabi variant) 12.2%, Urdu (official) 7.1%, Balochi 3%, Hindko 2.4%, Brahui 1.2%, other 2.4%
- **Urbanization:** 38%, rate of urbanization 2.1%
- **Literacy rate:** 58% (age 15 and above) - male: 69.3%; female: 46.5% (2019)

According to the [World Bank Pakistan data](#) (accessed 24 June 2024):

- **Population/age:** 36.6% of the population are below 14 years of age, 4.2% are above 65 (2022).
- **Education:** The completion rate for primary education is 68% (2021), as of 2018, an estimated 6 million children dropped out of school.
- **Unemployment:** 5.7%, the rate of vulnerable employment is 56.3% (modeled ILO estimate).
- **IDPs/Refugees:** In 2022, the refugee population was estimated at 1,743,785. Back in 2015, an estimated 4 million migrants were living in Pakistan. In 2017, an estimated 6 million Pakistanis worked abroad, according to the [IOM](#) (IOM, Pakistan - Migration snapshot, August 2019). According to the [ILO](#), as of December 2019, 11 million Pakistanis were resident abroad as migrant workers. While the total number of undocumented Afghan migrants returning to their country since September 2023 was around 545,000, the number of returnees in the first quarter of 2024 was [54,000 people](#) (IOM Flow Monitoring Summary Report 2022, 8 March 2023).

According to [UNDP Human Development Report Pakistan](#) (data updates as of 13 March 2024):

- **HDI score:** With a score of 0.540, Pakistan ranks 164th of 193 listed countries in the UNDP's HDI (medium human development).
- **Life expectancy:** 66.4 years
- **Median age:** 22.7
- **Gini coefficient:** 33.5
- **Gender inequality:** A score of 0.522 gives Pakistan the rank 135 of in the Gender Inequality Index
- **Unemployment:** The unemployment rate is 4.5% and 55.5% of the population are in vulnerable employment. The rate of unemployed youth is 8.9%, the rate of youth neither in school nor employment is 31.3% (between 15 and 24 years of age). The rate of children between 5 and 17 working is 12.8%.

Although the issue of ethnicity is not as dominant in Pakistan as in many other countries in the region, it should not be ignored. This becomes immediately clear when Pakistan is seen together with Afghanistan: The Pashtun minority in particular covers large areas on both sides of the border. The decision by the Pakistani authorities to [fence off](#) the more than 2,500 kilometer long border with Afghanistan has strongly affected Pashtuns on both sides of the border, as family ties and trading patterns from both sides have been cut off (Gandhara, 17 May 2021). The governments of Pakistan and Iran have announced that they intend to force the [repatriation of millions](#) of Afghan refugees, regardless of whether they have been officially registered or not (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 29 September 2023). In a first step, this would affect 1.7 million people. The announcement alone, but

also the implementation of the policy shows that Pakistan's government has become less enthusiastic about the Taliban ruling neighboring Afghanistan than initially.

The Pashtuns are one of the largest minorities worldwide without a nation state of their own. (It is frequently stated that the Kurdish people - numbering under 40 million - are the largest people without a nation. Pashtuns however number around 45 million.) Their strong reaction to the Indian decision to strip the Indian state Jammu and Kashmir of its statehood indicates that ethnic and religious motives are always part of such political decisions. Another minority coming to the limelight are the country's Balochs. An independency movement has grown in strength and the April 2022 attack against the Chinese teachers was reportedly carried out by a Baloch [insurgency group](#) (Jamestown Foundation, 1 July 2022).

According to a report by [UNICEF](#) (accessed 2 May 2024), Pakistan still has the second-highest out-of-school rate in the world, with 22.8 million aged 5-16 not attending school, representing a staggering 44% of all children in this age group (UNICEF, undated, accessed 2 May 2024). At primary level, five million children are out of school, 60% of whom are girls. Disparities are based on gender, socio-economic status and geography, as can be seen for example in Balochistan, where 78% of all girls do not attend school. It should be noted that efforts to improve the poverty situation in Pakistan did not include minorities such as Christians, a prime example of this is the [Poverty Alleviation Fund](#) set up by the World Bank (UCA News, 28 October 2022). In a press conference in May 2024, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif acknowledged that more than [26 million children](#) are out of school and that according to UNICEF, 70% of the 10-year-old are not able to read or understand texts properly. He pledged a program against these problems (Asia News, 9 May 2024).

In [World Bank's Pakistan overview](#) (updated 2 April 2024), it is stated:

- "Poverty reduction has slowed amid recent shocks, as economic growth has remained volatile and slow. Pakistan made significant progress towards reducing poverty between 2001 and 2018 with the expansion of off-farm economic opportunities and increased inflow of remittances. However, rapid poverty reduction has not fully translated into improved socio-economic conditions, as human capital outcomes have remained poor, with high levels of stunting at 38 percent and learning poverty at 78 percent. Critical constraints, including persistent fiscal and current account deficits, protectionist trade policies, unproductive agriculture, a difficult business environment, a heavy state presence in the economy, and a financially unsustainable energy sector, have remained unaddressed, leading to slow and volatile growth. Progress with poverty reduction has recently slowed amid macroeconomic instability, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the catastrophic 2022 floods. The estimated lower-middle income poverty rate is 40.1 percent (US\$3.65/day 2017 PPP) for the year 2023-24, virtually the same as the poverty rate in 2018, but with 7 million more Pakistanis living below the poverty line."

On the 2022 floodings, it added:

- "Pakistan experienced heavy monsoon rains in 2022 leading to catastrophic and unprecedented flooding with enormous human and economic impacts. Roughly 33 million people were impacted, and many permanently displaced. More than 13,000 kilometers of roads were destroyed, 2.2 million houses damaged, around 3.8 million hectares of crops were flooded, and an estimated 1.2 million livestock were killed. Limited access to input and output markets and temporary dis-

ruptions to supply chains subsequently drove up food prices and added to existing price pressures resulting from reduced agricultural yields and the global rise of food prices. The Government's Post-Disaster Needs Assessment estimated that the need for rehabilitation and reconstruction is at US\$16.3 billion."

The nation's low investment in education over recent decades has led to a growth in the number of Islamic madrassas. An estimated 11,000 of these (out of a total of roughly 35,000) follow the strict teachings of Deobandi Islam. Exact student numbers are unknown. While some madrassas may make pupils literate and teach them mathematics, many others simply offer Quran reading, Islamic Studies and nothing else. As these madrassas are not registered and supervised, the authorities have no real idea what is going on in them. Various governments have tried to at least register them in the past but encountered fierce opposition. The Khan government was [Islamizing state schools](#) by introducing changes in the curriculum according to which all students were required to read the entire Quran with translation, learn Islamic prayers and hadith. It further stipulated that every school has to employ a Hafiz (a person who has memorized the Quran) and a Qari (a Quran reciter) to teach these subjects (DW, 24 May 2021). This is also a way to open a career path for graduates from madrassas and pour their ideology into mainstream schooling. Whether the policy of [excusing religious minority students from mandatory Islamic studies](#) (UCA News, 24 January 2024) is a harbinger of a policy reversal in that respect remains to be seen.

Reflecting on the widening gap between rich and poor in Pakistan, one [observer](#) stated: "Such is the disparity that at a time when Aida Girma-Melaku, Unicef's representative, reported that Pakistan confronts a triple burden of malnutrition affecting young children, adolescents, and pregnant and lactating women, with 40 per cent of children under the age of five being stunted, Pakistan spent \$1.2 billion on imports of luxury cars and electric vehicles for its rich and powerful in the last half of 2022." (South Asia Monitor, 13 June 2023).

Gender perspective

Pakistan is heavily influenced by the Islamic religious landscape and is particularly discriminatory towards for women and girls of minority religions ([HRWF, 12 March 2023](#)). Christian women are at risk of kidnappings, forced conversions, and forced marriages ([ACN, 17 March 2023](#)). Within marriages, women reportedly experience high rates of domestic violence (exacerbated by the economic strain caused by the COVID-19 crisis) ([Deutsche Welle, 7 July 2020](#)). Few women choose to file for divorce due to the high levels of social stigma attached.

Technological landscape

According to DataReportal [Digital 2024: Pakistan](#) (23 February 2024) / Survey date: January 2024:

- **Internet usage:** 45.7% penetration
- **Social media usage:** 29.5% of the total population – female: 25.9%; male: 74.1%. This reflects women's restricted access to information and community networks.
- **Active cellular mobile connections:** 77.8% of the total population. According to a 2023 Gender Gap [report](#), 52% of Pakistani women are mobile phone owners compared to 81% of men (GSMA, 2023, "The Mobile Gender Gap Report 2023" p.17).

According to [Freedom on the Net 2023 Pakistan](#):

- Pakistan is designated "Not free".
- "Internet freedom remained constricted during the coverage period as the Pakistani government imposed digital controls amid an escalating confrontation between former prime minister Imran Khan and the powerful military establishment. Authorities routinely use internet shutdowns, platform blocking, and arrests and harsh convictions to suppress unwanted online speech, both under the former *Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf* (PTI)-led government and under the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM), the coalition that immediately succeeded it in office. Online activists, dissidents, and journalists are often subjected to harassment by supporters of the PDM coalition and the PTI, including some cases of physical assault and enforced disappearances."
- "Internet penetration in Pakistan has increased at a steady rate. As of April 2023, internet penetration stood at 53.8 percent, compared to 53.1 percent in May 2022, according to data from the Pakistan Telecommunications Authority (PTA). Mobile internet penetration rates stood at 52.47 percent as of April 2023, compared to 51.73 percent in the previous coverage period."
- "Low literacy, difficult economic conditions, and conservative cultural norms have also created inequalities in how Pakistanis access the internet. The digital divide between men and women in Pakistan is among the highest in the world; religious, social, and cultural norms discourage women from owning devices. According to the GSMA, women were 33 percent less likely than men to own a mobile device and 38 percent less likely to use the internet as of June 2022. The PTA reports that out of 114.4 million mobile internet subscribers, only 26.4 million are women. A 2021 report by Media Matters for Democracy found that six of every 10 Pakistani women are likely to have their internet usage restricted, monitored, or controlled by family members. Women who are active online report high levels of harassment that discourage greater use of ICTs."

DataReportal's (Digital 2024: Pakistan) Internet usage estimate of 45.7% means that well over 100 million people do not have Internet access. Pakistan announced the implementation of a very [strict Internet law](#), according to which the government's Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) would have the power to shutdown an entire online system, leading observers to call the plan "draconian" (Reuters, 19 November 2020). Google, Facebook and Twitter [threatened to leave](#) Pakistan if this law is strictly implemented (Associated Press, 20 November 2020). The authorities reacted by announcing that the legislation would be [reviewed](#) (Al-Jazeera, 26 January 2021). However, as of 2024, no changes could be observed and the aforementioned companies were still operating in Pakistan, complying with government demands of censorship to varying degrees.

The Ministry of Religious Affairs and Interfaith Harmony claimed that 400,000 social media accounts in Pakistan [spread blasphemy](#) (Bitter Winter, 18 July 2023), illustrating the importance the topic has in politics and society. In a strong reminder that pressure and censorship are daily challenges in the offline world as well, one of the most prominent TV presenters, Hamid Mir, was [banned from TV](#) in 2021 after he gave a speech criticizing the army (Gandhara, 31 May 2021). After he and his family received death threats he apologized, and was allowed to [return](#) to the screen in March 2022 (The Friday Times, 8 March 2022).

Security situation

Afghanistan

The Security situation in Pakistan climbed to new levels of volatility in the WWL 2025 reporting period due, to a large degree, to the Taliban being in power in neighboring Afghanistan. The number of suicide attacks in Pakistan since the Kabul take-over has [surged](#); these attacks were not just carried out by violent Islamic groups such as TTP and Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) (Jamestown Foundation, 6 May 2022). Attacks against the [police](#) in urban areas seem to become more frequent (Jamestown Foundation, 14 April 2023). It was an attack on 30 January 2023, however, which shocked the country and the security establishment alike: A suicide bomber, wearing a police uniform, entered a mosque in a police compound in Peshawar and [killed more than 100 people](#) (Reuters, 2 February 2023). Although the Pakistani Taliban (TTP) officially denied responsibility, it is believed that a faction of the TTP called *Jamat-ul-Ahrar* was behind the attack. (This group is probably best known for the bomb-blast at All Saint's church in Peshawar in September 2013, which killed at least 127 Christians.)

Pakistan even conducted [airstrikes](#) against camps belonging to radical Islamic Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in Afghanistan on 18 March 2024 (Al-Jazeera, 18 March 2024). Pakistan's armed forces estimate the number of TTP fighters to be around 5,000-6,000 and although this may be an overestimation, it is clear that the TTP has found a safe haven in Afghanistan. It has been able to increase its attacks against Pakistan's interests, including action against Chinese nationals, an example being a [suicide attack](#) that killed five Chinese engineers on 26 March (CNN, 27 March 2024). Pakistan's airstrikes against targets on Afghan soil represent an escalation and may also be used to justify exerting additional pressure on Afghan refugees in Pakistan to return. It is to be expected that there are Christians among those refugees. Meanwhile, Pakistan promised to provide ["foolproof" security](#) for Chinese nationals in the country (Panda Paw Dragon Claw, 29 April 2024).

Radical Islamic groups

As already mentioned above, although the army and the government have declared war against some Islamic radicals, they continue to follow a policy of trying to distinguish between 'good' and 'bad' jihadists. While it fights the latter, it works with the former (eg. *Lashkar-e-Toiba*, now *Jamaat-ud-Dawah*, and the Haqqani network, which is prominently represented with several members in the new Afghan Taliban government) and uses them as a proxy to reach its goals in neighboring countries such as Afghanistan and India.

The TTP has become stronger and has added what one observer called ["strategic depth"](#) (CTC Sentinel, May 2023). One way of influencing Afghanistan is to send back hundreds of thousands of Afghan refugees, who have lived in Pakistan for more than two decades, knowingly causing immense social and economic challenges for an already struggling country. On the other hand, tens and maybe hundreds of thousands are currently trying to leave Afghanistan and are looking to neighboring Pakistan as a possibility for doing so.

Afghanistan holds other major challenges for Pakistan as well: The [assassination](#) of a high-ranking TTP member in the Afghan province of Nangarhar on 9 January 2022 suddenly made the Pakistan Taliban unsure whether they can rely on having a safe haven in Afghanistan (Jamestown Foundation, 28 January 2022). No-one claimed responsibility for the targeted killing. Another [assassination](#) of three

high-ranking TTP members took place in August 2022 (Gandhara, 7 August 2022). The Afghan Taliban had previously [complained](#) that Pakistan had allowed the USA to use its airspace for drone strikes against targets in Afghanistan, showing growing discontent within the movement towards the government (Gandhara, 30 September 2022).

The Islamic State group (IS), seems weakened, but is still alive and may refresh its forces with disgruntled members of the Taliban. ISKP made its presence felt by claiming the [killing of the Taliban shadow governor](#) of Nangarhar Province (Afghanistan), who resided in Peshawar (Jamestown Foundation, 3 May 2021). The increasing presence of militant groups specifically naming Christians as their targets has worsened the situation for Christians in the region; examples are internationally known groups like al-Qaeda and the ISKP, but also Pakistan's own groups like *Lashkar-e-Taiba*, *Jaish-e-Mohammed* and others.

Baloch separatists

It is not only the TTP staging high-profile attacks against Chinese nationals (as in the 2021 bus attack which killed nine Chinese). On 26 April 2022, a female suicide bomber and student at Karachi University, [killed three](#) Chinese language teachers and their driver working for the university's Confucius Institute. The ethnically motivated separatist Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) claimed responsibility for the attack (BBC News, 27 April 2022). Baloch militant attacks are increasing and have reached the [highest level](#) since 2018 (Jamestown Foundation, 23 September 2022). Another attack in April 2023 killed a Christian sanitation worker whom the BLA accused of being a government spy.

India

The simmering conflict between Pakistan and India over Punjab came briefly to the boil in February 2019, as already mentioned above under *Recent History*. India's decision to put Jammu and Kashmir under direct rule of Delhi in August 2019 caused a great deal of [\(diplomatic\) protest](#), but so far no military or violent reaction (The Diplomat, 9 July 2020). Also, jurisdiction over the federally administered tribal areas (FATA) is still limited. This volatile region bordering Afghanistan is still ruled according to a colonial law called "Frontiers Crime Regulation" dating back to 1901, which effectively bans intervention from police and courts and adds to the local peoples' alienation. In this region, Pakistan's Constitution seems to be effectively abrogated. The decision to merge the federally administered tribal areas with neighboring Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province in 2018 was taken due to public pressure and comes [fraught with challenges](#) (ICG, 20 August 2018).

Iran

Cross-border attacks against targets in Iran in January 2024 seemed to have the potential for further escalation and a quickly deteriorating situation ([IISS, 6 March 2024](#)). However, the [visit](#) of the Iranian president in Islamabad in April 2024 (Reuters, 21 April 2024) was intended to mend ties and boost the struggling economy of both countries.

Christians

Christians in Pakistan suffer from the volatile security situation and the high level of violence as does society in general. However, as a religious minority, they do not have the necessary channels for seeking protection: They have no connections to politicians, strongmen or other influential people

with the power to give protection and relief. Additionally, Christians and other religious minorities not only face social hostility, but also a security apparatus, especially the police force, which is more interested in appeasing local strongmen and keeping things calm than in implementing the law and protecting minorities. Courts - at least the higher ones - have a slightly better track-record in this respect. However, when they are finally in a position to judge a case, Christians have often languished in prison for years before any ruling is made and it is then often too late to bring change to a situation.

Gender perspective

Against this backdrop of violence towards Christians, daily life is a challenge for both men and women. If identified, a male Christian convert from Islam might be accused of blasphemy, beaten or killed. For women and girls on the other hand, the greatest threat is forced marriage. Girls from religious minorities are commonly targeted for abduction, forced conversion and forced marriage ([CEDAW, 2020, p.10](#)). Statistics reveal that over 1,000 Christian and Hindu girls, typically between 12 and 25 years, are kidnapped, forced to convert, and married off to Muslim men, annually ([Forbes, 2020](#)).

As noted in a report by [CREID \(2020, p.55\)](#) ideologically targeted sexual abuse is directed specifically at religious minorities, both for sexual predation but also as a 'conquest' to win the girl over to the majority religion. There have been several reports of cases where the court ruled that the victim should live with her abductor, on the basis that she had 'willingly' converted to Islam ([CLAAS, June 2021; Church in Chains, March 2022](#)). These cases exemplify the impunity granted perpetrators and why many families consider it pointless to take legal action. Pakistan's Commission on Implementation of Minority Rights has set out a plan to deal with the concerning rate of forced marriages and conversions ([David Alton, 10 March 2021](#)). Linked to this issue, the trafficking of Christian girls (usually into China) also remains an ongoing concern ([Brookings Institution, March 2022](#)).

Christian origins

According to the Church historian Eusebius, writing in the 4th century AD, the apostles Thomas and Bartholomew were assigned to Parthia (modern Iran) and India. By the time of the establishment of the Second Persian Empire (AD 226), there were bishops of the Church of the East in northwest India, Afghanistan and Baluchistan (which includes parts of Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan), with laymen and clergy alike engaging in missionary activity. Roman Catholic missionary work took off on the Indian continent with the arrival of the Portuguese in the 16th century and became [established in Lahore](#) from about 1579 onwards (Catholic Online, accessed 26 November 2020). In more modern times, Christianity became firmly established through Protestant missionary work in the late 18th and 19th centuries and has continued to grow ever since. However, due to rising pressure in recent years, many Pakistani Christians have emigrated to countries like Sri Lanka or Thailand.

Church spectrum today

Pakistan: Church networks	Christians	%
Orthodox	0	0.0
Catholic	1,143,000	25.3
Protestant	2,777,000	61.4
Independent	706,000	15.6
Unaffiliated	21,600	0.5
Doubly-affiliated Christians	-122,000	-2.7
Total	4,525,600	100.0
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	1,044,000	23.1
Pentecostal-Charismatic	940,000	20.8

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

Orthodox: Eastern (Chalcedonian), Oriental (Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite), Nestorian (Assyrian), and non-historical Orthodox. **Roman Catholics:** All Christians in communion with the Church of Rome. **Protestants:** Christians in churches originating in or in communion with the Western world’s 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Includes Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (any of whom may be Charismatic) and denominational Pentecostals, but not Independent traditions such as Independent Baptists nor independent Charismatics. **Independents:** Christians who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). **Unaffiliated Christians:** Persons professing publicly to be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches. **Doubly-affiliated Christians:** Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once. **Evangelical movement:** Churches, denominations, and individuals who identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls. **Pentecostal-Charismatic:** Church members involved in renewal in the Holy Spirit, sometimes known collectively as "Renewalists".

Whereas the Catholic Church in Pakistan is homogenous, the Protestant Church is divided into many different denominations, the oldest of which are the Church of Pakistan (part of the Anglican Communion), the World Communion of Reformed Churches, the World Methodist Council and the Presbyterian Church. There are many smaller Protestant denominations present, among them Baptist, Brethren and a variety of Pentecostal churches.

Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on the Research & Reports pages of the Open Doors website:

- <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/>.

These are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom):

- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Pakistan>
- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>.

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