

Pakistan: Ongoing Political Repression

Excerpts of remarks by Rep. Chris Smith, Co-Chairman

Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

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Today's hearing of the Lantos Commission focusing on Pakistan's Ongoing Political Repression, will come to order.

Welcome—and special thanks—to our very distinguished panel of experts. We look forward to your testimony and recommendations to mitigate and help end pervasive human rights abuse in Pakistan.

Today we will hear about the government's ongoing repression of political opposition, of independent journalists, and of many people and groups whom the government of Pakistan sees as its opponents.

Life in Pakistan today is marked by rampant government violations of basic freedoms, particularly freedom of speech and media freedom, and the denial of free and fair elections.

Pakistan is a country of over 250 million people—the fifth-largest country in the world—so the human cost of this repression is immense in its scope as well its severity.

This sad situation is not a new development. Since Pakistan obtained independence in 1947, few of its governments have respected the rule of law, human rights, or held free and fair elections. Pakistan's military governed the country directly for 33 of the past 77 years, otherwise often dominating governments, intimidating civil society, and acting with impunity. There has been little freedom of speech or media freedom.

Yet in recent years the government's human rights record has taken a sharp turn for the worse.

And this is closely connected to conflict between, on one side, Pakistan's military-political establishment, and, on the other, former Prime Minister Imran Khan and the political party he led, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI). As Prime Minister from 2018-2022, Khan became a fierce critic of Pakistan's military, its political establishment, and public corruption. He became genuinely popular. In 2022 he was ousted as Prime Minister, in a move that was widely seen as a political coup orchestrated by the military.

Since Khan's ouster, he has been imprisoned, many supporters have also been imprisoned, and Pakistan's political life has been dominated by the government's clamp down on the PTI.

The March 2024 elections resulted in a proclaimed victory for the established parties. But the elections were widely seen as unfree and unfair, including by the US government, marked as they were by a ban on the PTI party, harassment of PTI officials, bans on public gatherings, a national internet shutdown, and massive voting irregularities. All this occurred in atmosphere of fear created by increasing "disappearances" and extra-judicial killings of persons critical of the government, and even transnational repression of Pakistanis living abroad, including in the United States.

Since the March 2024 elections, the clampdown on public opposition has continued.

There are other grave violations of human rights – less connected to party politics— including the harassment and persecution of Ahmadi Muslims, Christians and Sikhs. Since 2018 the U.S. State Department has designated Pakistan a Country of Particular Concern, meaning the government is responsible for "particularly severe violations of religious freedom" — systematic, ongoing, egregious violations. According to the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, "Pakistani government's systematic enforcement of blasphemy and anti-Ahmadiyya laws severely restricts freedom of religion or belief for all citizens.

Authorities' failure to address mob violence associated with blasphemy accusations, as well as forced conversions of religious minorities—including Hindus, Christians, and Sikhs—to Islam, reinforces a climate of intolerance and fear." There are now Ahmadis and Christians imprisoned and on death row, that are awaiting execution, for outlandish accusations of "blasphemy." Ahmadis have been arrested for offering prayers in mosques, assaulted by mobs, and one man was killed.

I look forward to hearing your recommendations for how Congress and the executive branch should engage with Pakistan to promote human rights.

In August 2023 the [*Intercept*](#) reported a leaked Pakistani diplomatic cable, which referred to then-US ambassador Donald Lu having encouraged Pakistan's military leaders to remove Khan, which resulted in the transition of Pakistan to quasi-dictatorship. The Biden administration denied it. But the report has been widely credited and continues to cast a shadow in Pakistan's politics and US-Pakistan relations. Any insight on this will be helpful.

If the previous administration bears any share of responsibility for this awful dictatorship – then Congress needs to know that. And the Trump administration needs to redouble its commitment to democracy and human rights.

Finally, I note that yesterday [Reuters](#) reported that Pakistan will create a new “paramilitary” force to counter protests by supporters of Imran Khan, which are expected on August 5, the second anniversary of Khan’s arrest.

Our first witness, Mr. Bukhari, is quoted by Reuters, saying that the new force "should not be used as a gimmick to silence political opponents, as has been previously witnessed when the government applied such laws against a large number of the PTI leadership and supporters." I think that’s very well said, and with that I’ll turn to my colleagues/ introduce the witnesses.