

Testimony of Jared Genser¹
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission
U.S. House of Representatives
“Pakistan: Ongoing Political Repression”

July 15, 2025

Co-Chair Smith, Co-Chair McGovern, and Distinguished Members of the Commission,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on the human rights crisis unfolding in Pakistan. I speak today as international counsel to former Prime Minister Imran Khan, whose case exemplifies the alarming erosion of democratic institutions, rule of law, and civil liberties under Pakistan’s current regime. My testimony will first outline the broader situation – marked by repression, censorship, and arbitrary detentions – and then focus on the plight of Mr. Khan and his supporters, before concluding with recommendations for Congress, the Trump Administration, and the broader international community.

Since Imran Khan was removed from power in April 2022, Pakistan’s human rights landscape has deteriorated markedly, as the military-backed authorities use a range of repressive measures to consolidate power and suppress dissent. Democratic institutions have been systematically undermined – the military wields significant influence over governance and the Pakistani regime has intensified its crackdown on political opposition through mass arrests, excessive force, and the misuse of broad counterterrorism and other overbroad public-order statutes.

It has been reported that more than 4,000 arrests were made following protests sparked by Khan’s detention. Some 104 civilians were convicted by military courts for their involvement in the May 9, 2023, protests and some 85 of them are still behind bars in proceedings the European Union said are “inconsistent with the obligations that Pakistan has undertaken under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.” These political prisoners were reportedly each given prison sentences of two to 10 years in prison. Estimates vary but there are likely more than 1,100 political prisoners currently behind bars in Pakistan, while about 8,000 others remain under indictment but are out on bail, awaiting for their trials to be held.

Equally troubling, Pakistan’s political and information landscape has been engineered to elect and keep in power the current regime, led by Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif. The general election, which was constitutionally required to be held within 90 days of the National Assembly’s August 2023 dissolution, was illegally postponed to February 8, 2024. Weeks before polling, the Supreme Court stripped Imran Khan’s PTI party of its universally recognized “cricket bat” symbol that has always been on the ballot, the signal for illiterate voters supporting PTI to vote for their candidate. On Election Day, the regime imposed a nationwide mobile-

¹ Jared Genser is Managing Director of Perseus Strategies, a public interest law firm, and serves as international counsel to Imran Khan, former Prime Minister of Pakistan, who has been detained in Pakistan as a political prisoner since May 2023. He can be reached at jgenser@perseus-strategies.com or +1 202 466 3069.

Internet blackout, delaying precinct-level result transmissions and giving officials hours to manipulate tallies before service resumed. The U.S., EU, and UK expressed “serious concerns” over these election irregularities and called for an investigation.

Simultaneously, press freedom has been eviscerated – the Committee to Protect Journalists has condemned blocks on critical websites and throttling of access in Balochistan, while broadcasters instituted a *de facto* ban on mentioning Khan or the PTI. Beginning in April 2022, the media regulator PEMRA issued successive directives outlawing Imran Khan’s airtime, culminating in a March 2023 order branding his speeches “hate speech.” Senior military officers have since warned media owners not to cover him. This blanket ban shows how influential voices that oppose the regime have been silenced and how the press is being controlled.

Enforced disappearances continue to be a pervasive tool of repression in Pakistan, with state security agencies routinely abducting activists, journalists, and opposition figures. These disappearances are a grave concern, especially with the total lack of accountability and systematic impunity surrounding these cases. Families of the disappeared and activists are often left with no choice but to publicly campaign for justice, only to face state intimidation, arbitrary detention, and violence for exercising their right to peaceful assembly. In March 2025, a group of UN human rights experts condemned the violation of the right to peaceful assembly and called for the government to “cease its crackdown on peaceful protesters.”

Against this backdrop, the case of former Prime Minister Imran Khan demonstrates the collapse of democratic norms in Pakistan. Mr. Khan was arrested on May 9, 2023, by paramilitary forces while at the Islamabad High Court. His detention – on bogus corruption charges – immediately sparked nationwide protests, which, as noted, were met with a harsh crackdown. In the three years since his ouster, Imran Khan has been charged with crimes in more than 200 court cases, ranging from incitement to violence to graft and terrorism. These cases are unfounded and have been marked by egregious due process violations. In the 2023 *Toshakhana* trial, for example, the judge barred the defense from calling any witnesses or delivering closing arguments before issuing a three-year sentence on this one charge just minutes later. Imran Khan remains behind bars today, held in solitary confinement and facing a cumulative prison term of over 27 years on an array of politically-motivated convictions. His wife Bushra Bibi is also serving a seven-year sentence on similarly politicized charges.

In July 2024, based on a petition that I submitted as Imran Khan’s counsel, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention issued a judgment concluding that Khan’s arrest had “no legal basis and appears to have been intended to disqualify him from running for political office.” It explained his detention was illegal and in violation of international law and called on the Pakistani Government to release Khan immediately. The regime has simply ignored this important judgment.

Both Republican and Democratic Members of Congress have also taken important steps to support advance democracy and human rights in Pakistan. On October 23, 2024, a bipartisan group of more than 60 Members of Congress, urged President Biden to press the Pakistani regime for Khan’s release and an end to mass detentions. Building on that momentum, the bipartisan “Pakistan Democracy Act” (H.R. 2311) was introduced on March 24, 2025, by Reps.

Joe Wilson (R-SC) and Jimmy Panetta (D-CA), authorizing targeted sanctions on specific Pakistani officials implicated in gross human rights abuses unless concrete reforms ensue. And on May 30, 2025, a bipartisan group of 59 Members of Congress wrote to President Trump warning that the February 2024 election was riddled with vote-rigging and political repression, highlighting the continued imprisonment of Imran Khan, and urging the Administration to condition ties on concrete steps toward free and fair elections and the release of all political prisoners. The signatories stressed that Pakistan's democratic backsliding "poses a direct challenge to core U.S. interests" and called on Washington to stand firmly with the Pakistani people's aspirations for representative government.

The conclusions drawn by U.S. Congress and UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention all point to the same reality – Imran Khan is a political prisoner, targeted for his popularity and open criticism of the military's meddling in politics. His continued incarceration – in defiance of court orders and the Working Group judgment and despite the overturning or suspension of several convictions – reflects the lawlessness of Pakistan's current rulers, who are determined to silence Khan's call for accountable government. Mr. Khan's persecution is inextricably linked to the broader repression facing the people of Pakistan – if a former Prime Minister can be treated in this manner, ordinary activists and citizens have little hope. The ripple effect of his case has seen scores of senior opposition figures have been jailed, intimidated into silence, or forced out of the party, and it has cast a pall over anyone daring to dissent. As Mr. Khan himself noted from prison, trying civilians in military courts and criminalizing dissent "undermined the fundamental rights of citizens" – a warning we should heed.

In closing, Pakistan is a nation of over 240 million people. Its success matters enormously not only for them, but to ensure core democratic principles are respected and regional stability is preserved. Today, however, the country's trajectory is deeply troubling – a military-backed regime has trampled on rule of law, silenced the press, and imprisoned its political opponents to secure an iron grip on power. Imran Khan's case is the most high-profile example, but countless others are suffering in the shadows of Pakistan's prisons for daring to speak out. The United States and the international community must not look away.

There is much that can be done to help – and, indeed, holding this hearing itself is an important step forward. First, I recommend that the Congress remain engaged and reach out to Pakistan's Prime Minister to demand the immediate release of all political prisoners and that freedom of the press, the rule of law, and democracy be restored to Pakistan. In addition, the Congress should urge President Trump and Secretary Rubio to make these goals a top priority for the Trump Administration. Second, I would ask that President Trump and Secretary Rubio both personally to take up the situation in Pakistan and engage directly with senior regime officials. While undoubtedly the situation in places like Ukraine, Gaza, and Iran, among others, are taking up enormous diplomatic bandwidth, the future of Pakistan is very important for the United States, which needs a stable partner with whom to cooperate on a wide array of issues, including counter-terrorism. The relentless crackdown on democracy, freedom, and the rule of law in Pakistan causes enormous instability within the country and this makes it much more difficult for the U.S. to view Pakistan as a reliable partner. Third and finally, I would call on the UN and the wider international community to hold the Pakistani regime accountable for its rights abuses and to put enormous pressure on the regime to reach a negotiated settlement with the opposition that

would begin with the release of all the political prisoners and create an irreversible roadmap for the restoration of the rule of law and democracy in Pakistan.

Tragically, the suffering of others has overshadowed the severe repression of the Pakistani people by the current regime. That said, however, the fate of Pakistan will have an enormous impact not only on its people, but on the region and the world. We cannot continue to ignore the severity and scale of the rights abuses being committed against the people of Pakistan. The time for action is now.

###