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HUMAN RIGHTS DAY IN PAKISTAN

OF PROMISE, PRESSURE AND POSSIBILITY

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Executive Summary

By the end of 2025, Pakistan stands at a critical juncture where short-term stability coexists with deepening structural and institutional stress. Across human rights, politics, the economy, security, climate vulnerability, and diplomacy, the country demonstrates resilience in avoiding systemic collapse, yet shows clear signs of erosion in governance quality, public trust, and long-term capacity.

The human rights situation reflects a marked contraction of civic space. While constitutional guarantees remain intact on paper, their application has weakened amid political contestation, restrictive legal frameworks, and heightened securitization of dissent. Press freedom, digital expression, and civil society activity face increasing constraints, drawing concern from domestic and international observers. The UN Special Rapporteur's warning regarding the detention conditions of former Prime Minister Imran Khan has crystallized broader anxieties about due process, custodial safeguards, and the politicization of accountability mechanisms. Persistent gender-based violence, low conviction rates, and continued marginalization of minorities further underscore the gap between legal reform and institutional enforcement.

Politically, sustained tensions between the federal government and Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf continue to disrupt governance. Protests, administrative closures, and heavy-handed security responses have imposed social and economic costs, particularly in Islamabad, Rawalpindi, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Disputes over judicial delays, access to political leadership, and proposed revisions to the National Finance Commission formula have deepened center–province frictions, weakening democratic norms and public confidence in state institutions.

Economically, Pakistan remains locked in a cycle of stabilization without transformation. IMF support has temporarily strengthened foreign exchange reserves, but fiscal space remains narrow and conditionalities constrain policy autonomy. Structural weaknesses dominate; banks prefer government securities over private-sector lending due to weak loan recovery and judicial inefficiency; agriculture suffers from elite capture and regulatory failure; unemployment has reached a two-decade high; and the trade deficit continues to widen amid weak export competitiveness. These trends reinforce dependence on external financing while limiting inclusive growth. Security conditions have deteriorated, with a significant rise in violence during 2025. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa has seen intense counter-terrorism operations, while Balochistan continues to experience insurgent initiative, highlighting uneven governance capacity and limited civilian oversight. Persistent insecurity undermines local economies, strains public services, and erodes state legitimacy in already fragile regions.

Climate stress and humanitarian pressures further compound these challenges. Acute water scarcity, worsening urban air pollution, and increasing climate volatility threaten livelihoods, public health, and food security. Weak planning, poor enforcement, and underinvestment have left both rural and urban populations highly vulnerable.

Human Rights Day in Pakistan

OF PROMISE, PRESSURE & POSSIBILITY

Every December 10, Pakistan joins the world in observing Human Rights Day, commemorating the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). For many Pakistanis, this day is a chance to reflect on how far the country has come since its founding, and how far it still needs to go to ensure that the rights guaranteed on paper are experienced by all citizens in practice.

In the early decades after independence, Pakistan's constitutional vision was clear: fundamental freedoms such as equality before the law, freedom of expression, and protection from discrimination were constitutionally enshrined. Over time, civil society and independent media helped expand public awareness of these rights, and institutions like the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) emerged to monitor abuses and advocate for reforms. Yet even in periods of relative openness, deep structural inequalities and the lingering impact of military and political instability meant that rights protections were uneven and fragile.

Today, Pakistan's human rights landscape tells a story of tension between aspiration and restriction. Civic space that once seemed to be expanding is now under pressure. Reports by human rights organizations and journalists point to a [deterioration in freedom of expression and independent media](#). According to HRCP and other observers, selected media outlets have faced [increasing restrictions](#), making independent journalism more difficult and narrowing the space for public debate. In 2025, the [Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists](#) and international watchdogs also criticized new laws regulating social media as threats to press freedom and digital rights, arguing that they risk criminalizing dissent and intimidating journalists.

These trends are not isolated. Human Rights Watch has documented expanding [crackdowns](#) on dissent and pressure on civil society groups, noting that authorities have used broad legal tools to limit criticism and civic activism, often under the guise of security or public order. The [United Nations](#) has scheduled reviews of Pakistan's human rights record, with international groups warning that violations continue amid political contestation and governance challenges.

The situation for women and marginalized genders highlights another dimension of this narrative. Gender-based violence remains pervasive despite legal reforms. Shocking incidents, such as the [recent killings](#) of transgender women in Karachi, underscore how social stigma and violence remain deeply entrenched even when the law ostensibly recognizes protections for gender minorities. Honour killings and similar [brutal practices](#) persist, drawing public outrage and demands for justice while also revealing the limits of legal protections in transforming social norms. Minorities and vulnerable groups often find themselves caught between formal rights guarantees and lived injustices. Activists advocating for ethnic and regional rights, such as Baloch human rights defenders, have faced detention and suppression, with their treatment raising serious concerns about due process and political pressures on civic actors.

Official responses to such pressures vary, but for many communities, the perception remains that state institutions are less inclined to protect dissenting voices than to constrain them. International assessments echo these domestic observations. U.S. and European monitoring reports have described Pakistan's human rights situation as "cause for concern," particularly emphasizing restrictions on expression, assembly, and due process. These assessments highlight patterns that many Pakistanis recognize: rights that once seemed to advance are now threatened by political polarization, institutional pressures, and legal ambiguity.

It is tempting to conclude that the situation is simply worsening. The evidence suggests that in several key areas, civic freedoms, press independence, digital expression, and protections for marginalized groups, Pakistan faces real setbacks compared to a decade ago. Yet this narrative has not dimmed civic energy. Across urban centres and rural communities, citizens, activists, and journalists continue to call attention to injustices, pushing public discourse toward accountability and dignity.

Human Rights Day should not be a moment of passive commemoration but a catalyst for action. Legal and institutional reforms alone are not enough; accountability mechanisms must be strengthened, judicial independence protected, and public education on rights intensified. Civil society organizations require genuine space to operate without fear of reprisal. Media and digital platforms should be freed from restrictive oversight that conflates dissent with destabilization.

Pakistan's human rights journey has been neither linear nor uniform. There have been moments of expansion and moments of contraction. Today, the challenge is to bridge the gap between constitutional commitments and everyday realities. Pakistan's future on Human Rights Day will be defined not by rhetoric, but by the extent to which rights are protected, respected, and realized for all its people.

Political Updates

Political tensions in Pakistan have intensified as clashes between Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) and the federal government intersect with governance and fiscal issues. The latest protests revolve around PTI leaders being denied meetings with former Prime Minister Imran Khan, highlighting the party's ongoing frustration with restrictions on their leadership.

PTI organized [sit-ins](#) outside Adiala Jail in Rawalpindi and the Islamabad High Court. Party leaders demanded the right to meet Imran Khan and pressed for quicker hearings of cases involving him and his family. In response, authorities sealed Adiala Road, closed shops and schools, suspended public transport, and deployed heavily armed police. These measures affected around 250,000 residents, causing economic losses for traders and disrupting daily life for students and workers.



Source: Reuters

The protests go beyond law and order, reflecting deeper political divisions. PTI has criticized the federal government's approach to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), pointing to delays in National Finance Commission payments, lack of security cooperation, and attempts to undermine the provincial government. [PTI leaders](#) argue that these actions threaten democratic norms and provincial stability, and they have called for the immediate release of [political prisoners](#) and unfettered access to their leader.



Source: Geo News

On 12 December 2025, the [UN Special Rapporteur](#) on torture, Alice Jill Edwards, warned that the detention conditions of former Prime Minister Imran Khan may amount to torture or other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment, citing reports of prolonged solitary confinement of up to [23 hours a day](#), constant surveillance, restricted access to lawyers and family, denial of outdoor activity and communal prayer, and inadequate medical care despite serious health conditions. Held at Adiala Jail since September 2023, Khan is reportedly confined in a small, poorly ventilated cell with extreme temperatures and limited natural light, leading to physical deterioration.

Beyond the individual case, the reported treatment reflects broader structural deficiencies in Pakistan's detention and justice systems, particularly the use of exceptional and punitive measures in politically sensitive cases, weak safeguards against abuse in custody, and limited accountability within prison administration, all of which risk violating international human rights obligations, damaging Pakistan's international standing, and further eroding public confidence in the rule of law.

Fiscal tensions are also in focus. The Planning Ministry has proposed changes to the [NFC](#) formula, reducing the weight given to population in favor of factors like revenue generation, ecological contributions, and inverse population density. These changes aim to reward provinces that actively mobilize their own resources, but they could also create friction in provinces like Punjab and Sindh, which may feel their share or influence is being reduced.



Source: Nukta

The combination of political protests, court delays, and fiscal disagreements has created a fragile environment. Analysts warn that ongoing conflicts between PTI and the federal government could further disrupt governance and weaken public confidence. In KP, where the province shoulders disproportionate security and social responsibilities, such tensions are particularly risky.

Resolving the crisis will require dialogue, respect for constitutional rights, and consistent implementation of fiscal agreements. Without this, protests and administrative paralysis are likely to continue, affecting both daily life and broader public trust. The situation points out that Pakistan's political stability depends as much on governance and fiscal fairness as it does on the legal system and political negotiation.

Economic Outlook

Pakistan's economic landscape in December 2025 reveals a convergence of structural weaknesses, policy constraints, and temporary relief measures that collectively define the country's macroeconomic vulnerabilities. The banking sector has remained relatively stable, largely due to its preference for government securities over private-sector lending. Weak loan-recovery laws, slow judicial processes, and prolonged litigation disincentivize banks from financing small and medium enterprises and farmers. Non-performing loans stand at [7.4 percent](#), significantly higher than global peers such as the United States at 1.5 percent and Indonesia at 2.25 percent. This reluctance to lend to productive sectors suppresses private-sector growth, stifles entrepreneurship, and perpetuates a credit bottleneck that undermines the economy's long-term potential. The current framework incentivizes risk-avoidance over market expansion, reflecting a structural flaw in financial intermediation.



Source: Pexels

The agricultural sector, a critical source of employment and rural income, faces acute pressures. Sugarcane farmers are receiving [Rs400 per 40 kilograms](#), below the estimated production cost of Rs544, while politically influential mill owners delay crushing operations. These delays not only reduce farm incomes but also disrupt Rabi crop cycles, illustrating the direct consequences of regulatory inefficiency and market distortions on rural livelihoods.

The combination of elite capture and weak enforcement demonstrates how governance failures amplify economic stress and reduce the capacity of the agriculture sector to contribute to overall growth.

Fiscal pressures are compounded by Pakistan's engagement with the International Monetary Fund under a [\\$7 billion bailout](#), which now comes with 64 conditionalities. These include anti-corruption measures, sugar-sector liberalisation, remittance-cost reduction, and reforms within the Federal Board of Revenue (FBR). While IMF disbursements have temporarily bolstered foreign exchange reserves to nearly [\\$21 billion](#), systemic fiscal weaknesses remain.



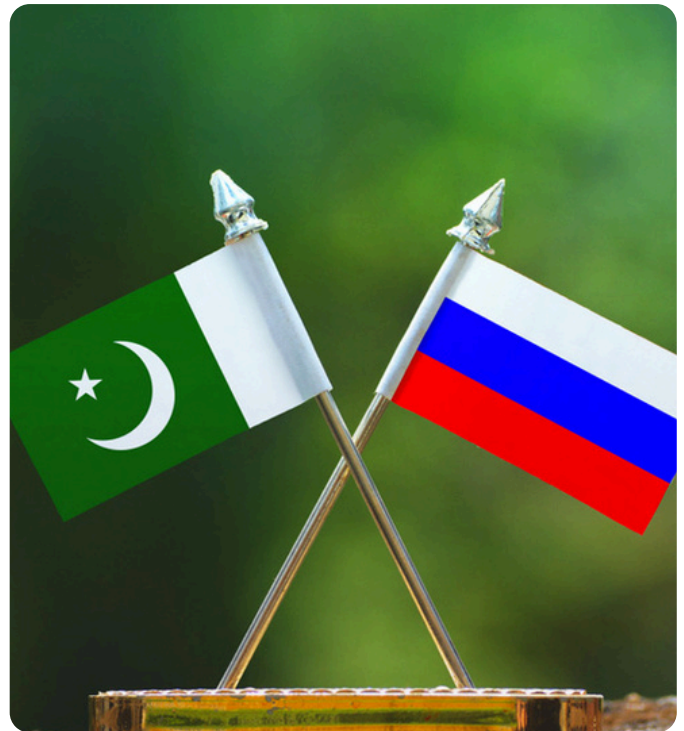
Source: Tribune

The FBR anticipates a [Rs560 billion shortfall](#) in the first half of the fiscal year, making the potential introduction of a mini-budget almost inevitable. Proposed tax relief packages of [Rs 975 billion](#) for corporate and salaried classes could stimulate demand and ease fiscal distortions, but they depend on IMF approval. The tension between domestic growth objectives and external fiscal compliance illustrates the limited policy space the government currently possesses, highlighting a structural dependency on external financing. The external sector shows a widening trade imbalance. The trade deficit over the first five months of the fiscal year reached \$15.5 billion, a [37 percent](#) increase year-on-year, driven by declining exports and rising imports. November alone recorded a deficit of \$2.86 billion, up [33 percent](#) from the previous year. Overvaluation of the rupee and disruptions in transit routes, particularly for *kinnow* exports to Afghanistan, have eroded export competitiveness, while remittance inflows, though critical, remain expensive. The imbalance reflects a structural deficiency in export diversification and competitiveness, indicating that short-term foreign exchange inflows, including from the IMF, cannot substitute for long-term improvements in trade performance.

Labour market indicators reveal further challenges. Unemployment has reached 7.1 percent, the highest in 20 years, with [3.5 million](#) new entrants annually into a labour market unable to absorb them. Population growth and low female labour participation exacerbate structural unemployment, while declining real wages reflect a stagnating economy. Policymakers' emphasis on private-sector-led employment is unrealistic without systemic investment in skills, infrastructure, and enabling regulations; this approach risks failing to translate demographic potential into economic output. Pakistan's current economic predicament is the result of intertwined structural, institutional, and policy weaknesses. The convergence of these factors creates a self-reinforcing cycle of constrained growth, rising social vulnerabilities, and continued dependence on external inflows. For sustainable recovery, Pakistan must prioritize coordinated reforms across financial enforcement, regulatory governance, export competitiveness, and human capital development. Immediate relief measures, such as IMF disbursements and targeted tax incentives, can stabilize the macroeconomy temporarily, but only structural interventions, including effective loan recovery mechanisms, trade liberalization, population management, and skill development, can transform short-term stabilization into long-term resilience. Failure to address these structural constraints risks prolonged stagnation, widening inequality, and a persistent erosion of investor confidence, leaving Pakistan's economic potential underutilized despite temporary fiscal and liquidity support.

Diplomatic Landscape

Pakistan's diplomatic landscape reflects a careful balancing act as the country navigates economic challenges, regional tensions, and evolving strategic partnerships. Relations with Russia have advanced in trade, energy, and industrial collaboration, with both sides exploring alternative banking channels to reduce reliance on Western payment systems. While this opens avenues for financial maneuvering, it also underscores Pakistan's need to seek external solutions to long-standing structural limitations in its financial system. The revival of Pakistan [Steel Mills](#) with Russian support represents an opportunity for industrial modernization, but its success will depend on sustained investment, technical expertise, and effective implementation, areas that have historically posed challenges.



Source: Profit

Engagement with Turkey through gas and mining deals worth over [\\$300 million](#) illustrates Pakistan's pursuit of foreign investment and technological cooperation in the energy sector. These partnerships have the potential to strengthen energy security and support sector reform, yet they also highlight Pakistan's reliance on external expertise and capital in areas where domestic capacity remains limited. The inclusion of Turkish firms in power sector privatization and energy projects reflects both an opportunity for modernization and the ongoing challenges of managing complex infrastructure and regulatory frameworks at home.

In the regional arena, Pakistan is exploring alternatives to [SAARC](#), reflecting frustration with the traditional South Asian architecture and India's limited cooperation. The proposed Pakistan-China-Bangladesh trilateral mechanism offers a pragmatic approach for like-minded states to collaborate on economic, security, and connectivity issues, though its effectiveness will depend on whether broader regional buy-in can be secured and whether Pakistan can translate these agreements into concrete outcomes.

[Relations with Afghanistan](#) continue to be delicate, with the Afghan Ulema Council's declaration against cross-border militancy being cautiously welcomed by Islamabad. Pakistan's insistence on [written guarantees](#) from the Taliban shows persistent concerns about groups operating from Afghan territory.

While the declaration signals potential internal pressure within Afghanistan, Pakistan's leverage remains limited, and past commitments from Kabul have often gone unfulfilled. Humanitarian aid diplomacy underscores Pakistan's role as a regional facilitator, yet the mixed response from Kabul highlights the fragility of influence in a context of competing domestic and political priorities.

Overall, Pakistan's diplomacy towards the end of 2025 demonstrates an effort to diversify partnerships, yet it also reveals underlying structural vulnerabilities. Reliance on foreign partners for financial, industrial, and energy initiatives points to domestic limitations, and regional strategies face the challenge of navigating longstanding conflicts and fragmented cooperation. While these efforts show initiative and pragmatism, the tangible impact will depend on implementation, sustained follow-through, and the ability to manage the interplay between external partnerships and internal capacity constraints.

Social and Humanitarian Updates

Pakistan is facing a range of urgent humanitarian and human rights challenges that affect millions of people every day. One of the most pressing issues is access to clean water. According to a report by the Asian Development Bank, nearly [80 percent](#) of the population does not have safe drinking water. The report warns that the country will need tens of billions of dollars over the next decade to fix its water systems. Population growth, pollution, and overuse of water for agriculture have caused the amount of water available per person to drop dramatically over the past decades. In cities, aging pipelines, unregulated urban expansion, and a lack of investment mean water is often wasted or unsafe, while rural areas struggle with unreliable supply. Without serious planning and investment, the report warns, Pakistan's water crisis will continue to worsen, affecting health, agriculture, and everyday life.



Source: Pexels

At the same time, Pakistan has taken steps to protect minorities with the creation of the [National Commission for Minorities Rights](#). This new body has powers to investigate complaints, summon witnesses, and recommend actions to the government. It is meant to ensure that religious and ethnic minorities can exercise their rights and are protected from discrimination. While the commission is a positive step, its success will depend on whether it can actually enforce the law and whether the government provides it with the resources and independence it needs.

Gender-based violence continues to be a serious concern. In Faisalabad district alone, 97 cases of gang rape were reported in the [first eleven months of 2025](#), yet not a single person has been convicted. Delays in DNA testing, slow court processes, and gaps in police investigations have left victims without justice. Experts say these numbers reflect deeper problems in the justice system and the urgent need for reforms to protect women and hold perpetrators accountable.

Meeting these challenges will require not only new laws and institutions, but also serious investment, better governance, and a commitment to ensure that the rights and dignity of all people are respected.

Climate Change-Related Updates

Pakistan is grappling with increasingly severe climate-related challenges that are affecting both urban and rural populations. In Balochistan, prolonged periods of [below-average rainfall](#) have pushed much of the province into drought conditions. The Asian Development Bank's recent report highlights that only 7.2 percent of the province's land remains arable, and groundwater levels are dropping by three to four feet annually. Crops that once flourished, including apples, grapes, wheat, and rice, are facing declining yields, putting the livelihoods of rural communities, about 75 percent of the population, under threat. Experts warn that without urgent measures to conserve water, expand reservoirs, and improve water management, agricultural land could shrink further, leading to food shortages and potential migration from affected areas.



Source: GlobalGiving

Urban centers are also facing climate-related pressures, particularly in terms of air quality. In Lahore, decades of industrial growth and reliance on high-emission transport have contributed to worsening smog, despite numerous clean-air policies and climate-resilience plans. Experts point to weak enforcement, poor coordination between government departments, and limited incentives for citizens to adopt low-emission behaviors as key barriers to meaningful improvement. Transport alone accounts for up to [83 percent](#) of Lahore's emissions, while stubble burning and industrial activity exacerbate the crisis. Researchers emphasize that without long-term preventive strategies and sustained behavioral change, the city's air quality will continue to deteriorate, posing serious health risks.



Source: The Guardian

Pakistan's climate vulnerability is mirrored across the region. [Recent flooding](#), storms, and landslides in countries such as Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Malaysia have caused thousands of deaths and displaced millions, underscoring the growing intensity of climate events. Experts attribute this to changing weather patterns driven by global warming, which similarly threaten Pakistan through erratic rainfall, rising temperatures, and water scarcity.

The country faces a dual challenge: managing scarce resources in rural areas while addressing environmental degradation in urban centers. Balochistan's water crisis, the shrinking agricultural base, and Lahore's worsening smog highlight the urgent need for integrated climate planning. Experts stress that effective adaptation will require improved governance, investment in infrastructure, enforcement of environmental regulations, and public awareness to mitigate the immediate and long-term impacts of climate change on Pakistan's population.

Security and Governance

Pakistan's security landscape in 2025 has shown a troubling surge in violence, with a sharp rise in both terrorism and counter-terrorism operations, highlighting persistent governance and security challenges. According to data from the Center for Research and Security Studies, the first eleven months of the year saw over [3,100 fatalities](#) linked to violent incidents, marking a 25 percent increase compared to 2024. Nearly two-thirds of these deaths occurred in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa, while Balochistan accounted for nearly a third. Civilians, security personnel, and militants alike have been caught in the crossfire, reflecting both the intensity of militant operations and the scale of government response.



Source: Tribune

The dynamics of violence vary significantly across regions. In Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa, aggressive counter-terrorism campaigns have kept militants largely on the defensive, with fatalities from security operations surpassing those from terrorist attacks. This suggests that state forces retain operational control, though at a high human cost. In Balochistan, the situation is reversed, with militant attacks causing more fatalities than security operations. This indicates that insurgent groups continue to exercise offensive initiative, maintaining pressure on both local populations and law enforcement agencies. The regional disparity underscores the uneven capacity of governance structures to address security threats and highlights the persistent challenges in areas where the state's reach is limited.

High-profile attacks, such as the ambush of [Assistant Commissioner Noor Wali Khan](#) in Bannu, illustrate the human toll of the ongoing insecurity. Such incidents not only target officials engaged in governance and judicial functions but also erode public confidence in the state's ability to maintain order. In response, security forces continue intelligence-based operations against militant hideouts, recovering weapons and neutralizing armed groups. Yet, these actions remain reactive and localized, often failing to address the underlying factors driving militancy.



Source: MSN

These patterns reflect deeper governance challenges. Effective administration in Pakistan's conflict-affected regions is hindered by limited institutional capacity, weak local oversight, and insufficient coordination between civil and military authorities. While national-level counter-terrorism policies demonstrate strategic intent, implementation gaps in areas like Balochistan and parts of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa expose structural weaknesses. Sustained violence affects civilian life, disrupts local economies, and strains public services, creating a cycle where insecurity undermines governance and governance deficits, in turn, exacerbate instability.

Pakistan's security environment presents a dual challenge: containing active militant threats while strengthening governance frameworks to ensure state authority and public trust extend beyond urban centers. Without addressing both operational and systemic deficiencies, the country risks continuing cycles of violence, localized insurgencies, and erosion of state legitimacy in its most vulnerable regions. Effective reform will require not only persistent counter-terrorism efforts but also investments in institutional capacity, community engagement, and governance mechanisms capable of sustaining long-term security and stability.



Reading Recommendations

- Constitution for All: Rethinking Gender Inclusive Governance in Pakistan ([Click Here](#))
- Rethinking Reforms Process in Balochistan: Innovation and Leadership at BCSA ([Click Here](#))
- Sports as a Tool for Preventing Violent Extremism in Pakistan ([Click Here](#))
- Groundwater Recharge: Reviving the Hidden Lifeline ([Click Here](#))
- Selling Misinformation ([Click Here](#))
- Data-Driven Cities: Lessons from World for Pakistan ([Click Here](#))
- The FY 2025–26 Budget and Its Impact on Pakistan’s IT & ITeS Sector ([Click Here](#))
- Planting for Survival: Pakistan’s Path Out of the Heat ([Click Here](#))
- Transparency Through Open Data: Key to Reforming Governance in Pakistan ([Click Here](#))
- From Reports to Reality: Why Pakistan Ranks Last in Global Gender Gap Index ([Click Here](#))
- From Policy to People: Rethinking Governance with Design Thinking ([Click Here](#))
- Floods, Heatwaves, and Hope: Reimagining Agriculture in a Warming Pakistan ([Click Here](#))
- The Fight for Transparent Access to Information in Pakistan ([Click Here](#))
- Life without Autonomy: Understanding Our Culture of Dependency ([Click Here](#))
- Prioritizing Citizens Beyond the Ballot ([Click Here](#))
- Solving the corruption challenge: The key may lie with the citizens. ([Click Here](#))
- Citizens’ Inclusion and Accountability is the Key to Improved Governance and Efficient Public Sector Institutions ([Click Here](#))
- Digital Community Policing ([Click Here](#))
- Privatization of Schools in Punjab ([Click Here](#))
- Water Governance Challenges in Pakistan ([Click Here](#))
- Consumer Protection in Pakistan ([Click Here](#))

