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POLICY BRIEF

Reimagining Civil Society
Action in Pakistan

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Introduction

Pakistan's civil society is operating in an environment marked by political centralization, regulatory pressure, shrinking donor support, and a rapidly changing media landscape. As individual organizations struggle to sustain advocacy or influence policy debates, many critical public issues increasingly escape meaningful civic scrutiny. This brief argues that issue-based civic coalitions offer a practical pathway for civil society to regain relevance and restore collective voice in Pakistan's evolving governance environment.

Executive summary

Civil society plays an essential role in public life by informing citizens, scrutinizing state policies, and bringing societal concerns into governance debates. While these functions are commonly associated with democratic systems, civil society is often equally important in non-democratic or hybrid political environments where institutional checks and public deliberation are limited. In such contexts, civic actors often advocate for the introduction of or return to democratic governance while helping ensure that public policy remains connected to societal realities and that governance decisions remain subject to a degree of public scrutiny.

In Pakistan, the ability of civil society to perform this mediating role has weakened significantly over the past decade. This contraction is not the result of a single law or political development. Rather, it reflects a broader transformation in the country's governance landscape shaped by political centralization, regulatory tightening, financial pressures, a rapidly changing communication environment and shifting priorities of western donors.

Pakistan today operates within a multi-crisis setting. Hybrid governance arrangements, persistent militant violence in some regions, a compromised trichotomy of power with judicial powers curtailed, recurring climate disasters, and prolonged economic instability have shifted policy priorities toward centralized and rapid decision-making. Major economic initiatives such as large infrastructure investments under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and investment facilitation mechanisms such as the Special Investment Facilitation Council (SIFC) have further concentrated authority within executive institutions. While such initiatives aim to accelerate economic recovery and attract foreign investment, they have also reduced the space for broader public debate around major economic and governance decisions.

At the same time, regulatory frameworks and financial pressures have constrained civil society's institutional capacity. The 2015 policy regulating international NGOs, combined with the compliance environment created during Pakistan's placement on the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) grey list from 2018 to 2022, increased scrutiny of non-profit operations and financial flows. Parallel shifts in international donor priorities away from governance programming toward humanitarian and climate assistance have further reduced resources available for policy advocacy.

Civil society's ability to influence public debate has also been affected by transformations in the media landscape. Legal and regulatory pressures on speech, financial challenges faced by traditional media institutions, and the rise of algorithm-driven social media platforms have weakened the channels through which civic actors once amplified policy concerns to national audiences.

In this environment, individual organizations often hesitate to raise politically sensitive issues because the costs of acting alone can be high. In such a situation, coalition-based civic engagement offers a practical pathway for restoring civil society's relevance. By distributing voice and responsibility across networks of organizations, professionals, and civic actors, coalitions can reduce risks associated with individual advocacy while ensuring that critical governance decisions continue to receive public scrutiny.

Pakistan's own history, from the Women's Action Forum in the 1980s to the Lawyers' Movement of 2007–2009, demonstrates that collective civic action has often emerged during periods of political constraint. Building on these traditions, civic coalitions today can help preserve the presence of civil society perspectives in national policy debates even within a constrained political environment.

Section 1: Civil society in a multi-crisis state

Civil society performs an essential function in public life by informing citizens, scrutinizing state policies, and bringing societal concerns into governance debates. While these roles are often associated with democratic systems, civil society is equally important in non-democratic or hybrid political environments where institutional checks are weak and public deliberation is limited. In such contexts, civil society not only advocates for introduction of or a return to democratic dispensation of the governance, civic actors frequently also serve as one of the few mechanisms through which citizens' concerns enter policy discussions. For example, civil society's efforts in Nepal's transition to democracy is widely recognized (Satyal, 2015)¹.

Civil society serves a basic but indispensable purpose in a state. It helps citizens understand government decisions, raises questions when policies appear unjust or opaque, and sustains debate when political institutions fail to do so. Through research, public engagement, and advocacy, civil society organizations translate complex policy choices into public issues that can be debated and contested.

Civil society is contracting within overlapping structural pressures: In Pakistan, however, the ability of civil society to perform these functions has weakened significantly over the past decade. This contraction did not occur because of a single law or policy. Rather, it reflects a deeper transformation in the country's political environment and governance priorities. Civil society in Pakistan has come under threat at multiple fronts, including state repression, reprisal from non-state and pressure groups, unnecessary laws curtailing the human rights work, flawed global financial mechanisms creating opportunities for security agencies to crackdown on civil society organizations (Baloch & Dawar, 2023)².

Hybrid governance and political de-pluralization: Pakistan has gradually moved from a relative pluralistic system to a hybrid political order in which formal democratic institutions coexist with strong informal centers of authority. Following the restoration of civilian rule in 2008, civil society organizations played a visible role in governance debates. Groups monitored elections, advocated transparency reforms, supported citizen participation in policymaking, and frequently contributed to public discussion through media platforms. During that period, civil society served as an intermediary between citizens and the state. Organizations could convene dialogue between

¹ <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/tr/pdf/ADA620719.pdf>

² <https://afpak.boell.org/sites/default/files/2023-06/civic-spaces-in-pakistan-tkf-afpak-publication.pdf>

policymakers and communities, present policy research in national debates, and mobilize public attention around governance challenges.

Over time, however, political polarization intensified and institutional authority became more centralized. The general elections of February 2024, which were widely contested by opposition parties and observers, marked another moment in this political evolution. Constitutional changes adopted in 2024 and 2025 recalibrated institutional balances and strengthened executive authority. Analysts argue that the judicial overhaul shifted the power dynamic among the executive, judiciary, and military (Z. Malik, 2025)³.

In such environments, governance increasingly relies on centralized coordination rather than open institutional negotiation. Civil society organizations continue to exist, but their role as mediators in public policy debates becomes less central.

Armed conflict and counter-insurgency: Pakistan has faced recurring waves of militant violence since the mid-2000s, particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan. After the collapse of the ceasefire between the government and the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in late 2022, militant incidents increased again across several districts. Ethnic militancy in Balochistan has also increased lately. Year 2025 was marked as one of the most violent years since the post-Zarb-e-Azb decline. The year was defined by a pronounced escalation in both the scale and lethality of militant violence, alongside an intensified state response (PICSS, 2025)⁴.

Counter-insurgency responses expanded security operations and surveillance in these regions. With terrorist violence refusing to recede, Pakistan's counterinsurgency operations have extended into Afghanistan, pushing the two countries into a state of armed confrontation. In conflict-affected areas, civil society advocacy becomes particularly sensitive. Work related to human rights violations, land disputes, displacement, or security policy often intersects with broader political and security narratives. Organizations attempting to raise such issues may face pressure from both state and non-state actors.

Climate catastrophe and economic stagnation: At the same time, Pakistan entered a period of overlapping environmental and economic crises that reshaped governance priorities. The catastrophic rains and floods of 2022 affected more than 33 million people, according to United Nations assessments. Approximately two million homes were destroyed, and infrastructure damage affected roads, irrigation systems, and agricultural land across large parts of the country. Economic losses were estimated at over \$30 billion, making the floods one of the most severe climate disasters in Pakistan's history. The floods in 2025 also affected around seven million people and caused around \$3 billion loss to economy (Ministry of Planning, 2025)⁵.

Economic instability compounded the crisis. Pakistan entered successive IMF stabilization programs in 2019, 2023, and 2024, reflecting persistent macroeconomic pressures. Inflation surged dramatically during 2023, exceeding 30 percent for several months and creating one of the most severe cost-of-living crises in decades (Economic Survey, 2023-24)⁶.

³ <https://afpak.boell.org/sites/default/files/2023-06/civic-spaces-in-pakistan-tkf-afpak-publication.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.picss.net/terror-trends/pakistans-comprehensive-national-security-profile-2025/>

⁵ <https://pc.gov.pk/uploads/pub/a-preliminary-assessment-flood-damages-economy-of-pakistan.pdf>

⁶ https://finance.gov.pk/survey/chapter_24/7_inflation.pdf

Trade disruption and agrarian distress: Pakistan's agriculture sector also shrank from 6.5 percent growth rate in 2023-2024 to a mere 0.56 percent in 2024-25. Price crashes, glut of production of minor crops in the absence of any export destinations including Afghanistan had a great toll on farmers. Pakistan and Afghanistan have stopped the bilateral trade completely since October 2025.

When governments operate under constant crisis such as security, climate disasters, and economic instability, policy priorities shift toward rapid stabilization. Decision-making becomes faster and more centralized. Public consultation and policy debate begin to appear secondary to urgency.

Geopolitical realignment and capital-driven governance: Geopolitical realignments have also influenced the evolving governance environment in Pakistan. As global strategic priorities shift and new investment partnerships emerge, economic policymaking has increasingly centered on attracting external capital and fast-tracking large development initiatives. This capital-driven approach often prioritizes speed, confidentiality, and centralized decision-making, leaving limited room for parliamentary debate or civic oversight. While such strategies aim to stabilize the economy and mobilize investment, they also reduce opportunities for civil society to participate in discussions around major economic and development decisions. Section 4 of this brief discusses the dynamics of capital-driven governance.

In such environments, civil society organizations remain active but increasingly struggle to shape national policy discussions. Instead of influencing decisions before they are made, they often respond only after policies have already taken effect.

Section 2: How civic space was closed?

Alongside political pressures, civil society organizations in Pakistan have faced increasing regulatory scrutiny and financial constraints that have further reduced their ability to influence public policy.

Extra-legal controls over registration, operations, and banking: Pakistan's civil society, particularly sections of which focus on scrutiny of governance, relied mostly on donor funding. The 2013 Economic Affairs Division (EAD) Policy institutionalized centralized oversight of national organizations receiving international funds, including requirements for Memoranda of Understanding (MoU), geographic limitations, and reporting obligations.

Although framed as regulatory rationalization, it effectively made operational legality renewable and discretionary. EAD policy, initially designed to be backed by a legislation, is devoid of a legal cover but the government extended a new policy when the Sindh High Court (SHC) declared the policy of no legal effect (*Marie Stoops Society vs Federation*, 2022). However, the new policy finalized in 2023 also did not survive the judicial scrutiny as the Lahore High Court (LHC) declared the policy void (*HRCP vs Federation*, 2024)⁷. Both the court decisions found the lack of a law on the back of this regulatory policy.

A Policy for Regulation of International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs) was also introduced in 2015. The policy created a centralized system through which INGOs were required to sign formal agreements with the federal government specifying their geographic areas of operation and reporting obligations. Although the policy was presented as an administrative reform designed to improve coordination and transparency, it also introduced new

⁷ <https://www.icnl.org/wp-content/uploads/Lahore-High-Court-Decision-on-EAD-Policy.pdf>

uncertainties for many organizations who were working on governance and advocacy issues with the assistance of INGOs.

Financial scrutiny intensified further when Pakistan was placed on the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) grey list in June 2018. Pakistan remained on the grey list until October 2022, during which time the country implemented extensive reforms aimed at preventing terror financing. Banks and financial regulators adopted stricter due-diligence procedures for transactions involving non-profit organizations. International transfers often required additional documentation and verification processes. Although the FATF framework targeted illicit financial flows rather than civil society directly, the compliance infrastructure created during this period had practical implications for many civic organizations (Baloch & Dawar, 2023). The federation and the provinces introduced new Charity laws added another tier of registration of civil society organizations.

Financial institutions often adopted cautious approaches when working with non-profit entities. International funding transfers became slower, and many organizations encountered difficulties opening or maintaining bank accounts.

Collapse of aid-centric civil society following Western disengagement: At the same time, the broader funding ecosystem that had supported Pakistan’s civil society sector began to change. For decades, a significant portion of governance-related civil society work in Pakistan had been supported by Western development assistance, particularly from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the European Union.

Beginning in the late 2010s, however, donor priorities shifted globally. International development funding increasingly focused on humanitarian relief, climate resilience, migration management, and geopolitical security concerns. Democracy promotion and governance programs declined in relative importance.

The restructuring of major USAID development programs after 2018 and the practical dissolution of the agency in 2025, combined with changes in European development funding frameworks, reduced resources available for civic advocacy initiatives. According to Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), global funding directed toward governance and civil society programming stagnated in recent years as donors redirected resources toward climate and humanitarian crises (OECD, 2025)⁸.

For Pakistani civil society organizations, these changes had immediate consequences. Many organizations downsized staff, reduced research programs, or redirected activities toward service delivery and humanitarian work. Civil society did not disappear. However, the sector’s capacity to sustain national policy debates weakened considerably. When major decisions emerged, whether related to climate, security, trade, or investment, fewer organizations possessed the resources required to analyze them and mobilize public discussion.

Crackdown on political actors pushing residual representation onto civic actors: The political developments following the successful no-confidence motion against Prime Minister Imran Khan in 2022 led to deepening political polarization and widespread public protests. Events following Khan’s arrest and the ensuing violent protests of May 9, 2023 triggered a broad state crackdown on the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI). Despite these pressures, PTI emerged as the largest political party in the 2024 general elections. However, as the principal opposition party, it has seen little easing in the state’s posture toward it. The party’s leadership and large sections of its cadre continue to face court cases, arrests, and widespread harassment. As a result, PTI has been largely unable to perform its

⁸ https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/cuts-in-official-development-assistance_8c530629-en/full-report.html

conventional opposition role of scrutinizing government decisions through issue-based political engagement. This vacuum of accountability and policy scrutiny would ordinarily be filled by civil society actors. Yet the aid-dependent segment of civil society has been unable to assume this role for the reasons discussed above.

Civil society actors operating outside donor-funded structures, including professional associations of lawyers and journalists, have also been affected by political fragmentation and deepening polarization. These divisions have weakened their collective capacity to resist regressive developments, particularly those affecting freedom of expression and judicial independence.

Organized civic action reframed as a security and compliance risk: Organized civic action has increasingly come to be viewed through the lens of security and financial compliance rather than democratic participation. Activities such as advocacy, public mobilization, or policy critique were often interpreted as potential regulatory or reputational risks for organizations and their partners. As a result, many civil society actors shifted toward cautious engagement or withdrew from sensitive policy debates, further narrowing the space for independent civic scrutiny.

Section 3: Media transformation and loss of civic amplification

Civil society influence depends not only on institutional capacity but also on communication platforms through which ideas reach the public. Over the past decade, Pakistan's media environment has undergone major changes that have weakened the channels through which civic voices once influenced national debate. One dimension of this transformation involves legal and regulatory pressure on speech.

The Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) enacted in 2016 and amended in 2025 expanded the government's authority over digital communication and online platforms. The law granted the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) powers to regulate digital content and restrict online platforms considered to violate legal provisions. While PECA was introduced primarily to address cybercrime and online harassment, journalist associations and civil society groups have expressed concern that many of its provisions discourage critical commentary.

Even when enforcement is limited, the presence of such legal frameworks can create a climate of caution, particularly when the safety of journalists and media is under threat. Pakistan Press Foundation has painted a bleak picture of media safety in its annual report for 2025 (PPF, 2025)⁹. Surveillance and the datafication of civic activity have become increasingly common, while unannounced censorship has extended to digital platforms operating at the margins of civic discourse. For instance, access to a news website was reportedly blocked for several days after it published a report detailing how land was acquired for the Green Pakistan Initiative (GPI) (JP, 2026)¹⁰.

Collapse and capture of traditional media institutions: Traditional media institutions have also experienced structural changes. During the late 2000s and early 2010s, television channels and newspapers played a central role in amplifying civil society debates. Talk shows regularly hosted civil society representatives discussing governance reforms, corruption cases, and public policy challenges. Over time, however, the financial sustainability of Pakistan's media sector weakened. Advertising revenues declined, media ownership structures consolidated, and newsroom

⁹ <https://pakistanpressfoundation.org/attacked-threatened-booked-and-silenced-a-bleak-picture-of-media-safety-and-free-expression-in-pakistan/>

¹⁰ <https://www.journalismpakistan.com/pakistan-blocks-lok-sujag-website-digital-media-under-pressure/>

budgets shrank. As a result, investigative journalism and policy analysis became more difficult to sustain (Faisal, 2025)¹¹.

Issues that require sustained explanation such as agricultural pricing policies, cross-border trade disruptions, or investment agreements, often receive limited coverage.

Algorithmic bias favoring monetizable, polarizing content: Meanwhile, public discourse increasingly shifted toward social media platforms such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), TikTok, and YouTube. These platforms operate through algorithmic systems designed to maximize engagement. Content that generates rapid emotional reactions spreads more easily than detailed policy analysis¹² (Outahar, 2025). Civil society organizations traditionally communicate through research reports, policy briefs, and press conferences. These formats struggle to compete within digital environments dominated by rapid information cycles. The result has been a communication gap. Civil society continues to produce analysis and advocacy, but its ability to shape national conversations has diminished significantly. Without strong amplification through media platforms, policy concerns often remain confined to specialized circles rather than reaching broader public audiences.

Section 4: Capital-driven governance and the absence of civic scrutiny

The weakening of civil society has become particularly significant as Pakistan's economic governance has shifted toward large investment frameworks and capital-driven development strategies. Over the past decade, several major economic initiatives have been introduced with the aim of accelerating growth, attracting foreign investment, and addressing structural weaknesses in the country's infrastructure and productive sectors. Yet these initiatives have also increasingly relied on centralized decision-making mechanisms with limited public scrutiny.

Little to no civic scrutiny of large-scale projects: One of the most prominent examples is the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), launched in 2015 as a flagship component of China's Belt and Road Initiative. CPEC financed a wide range of infrastructure and energy projects, including highways, power plants, port facilities, and special economic zones. By the early 2020s, CPEC energy projects alone had added thousands of megawatts to Pakistan's electricity generation capacity.

While these investments addressed important infrastructure gaps, many aspects of the agreements including financing arrangements, sovereign guarantees, and repayment structures, remained outside sustained public debate. Parliamentary scrutiny had been scant and broader national discussions around long-term financial obligations, project prioritization, and governance frameworks were limited. While many questions are asked, governments of Pakistan¹³ and China control the narrative over CPEC¹³ (Afzal, 2020).

The issues of transparency kept a weaker civil society away from assessing the efficacy or providing any oversight to this great initiative. Civil society organizations could have played a crucial role in examining these issues. Questions surrounding debt sustainability, environmental impacts, community consent, and transparency in procurement are precisely the kinds of policy matters that civic actors often analyze in democratic systems.

¹¹ <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/rise-fall-pakistans-media-industry-crisis-decades-making-faisal-wexpf/>

¹² <https://medium.com/@hayatoutahar/facing-the-algorithm-of-rage-for-an-ecology-of-digital-discourse-987388ae9b08>

¹³ https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/FP_20200615_china_pakistan_afzal_v2.pdf

A similar dynamic is visible in the emergence of new investment-driven governance frameworks in recent years. The establishment of the Special Investment Facilitation Council (SIFC) in 2023 represented a major institutional innovation designed to accelerate investment decisions in sectors such as agriculture, mining, energy, and information technology. The council brought together civilian and military leadership to streamline approval processes and remove bureaucratic obstacles to foreign investment.

From the perspective of economic policymakers, the logic behind SIFC was straightforward. Pakistan's economy required rapid investment to generate growth, increase exports, and stabilize macroeconomic indicators. Yet the institutional design of such mechanisms also concentrates decision-making authority and reduces the visibility of policy deliberations.

Large land allocations for corporate agriculture, mineral development initiatives, and infrastructure agreements increasingly emerge from executive coordination forums before entering broader public discussion. In such settings, parliamentary debate either does not occur or occurs after major decisions have already been taken. While there is little scrutiny of the initiatives, a recent assessment of the GPI, criticized it for being more of an illusion rather than a concrete project (Aslam, 2026)¹⁴.

In most democratic systems, civic actors help translate technical economic decisions into issues of public debate. They analyze policy proposals, consult affected communities, and present evidence to policymakers and citizens alike. When such mechanisms weaken, economic governance becomes increasingly insulated from public scrutiny. This dynamic has also been visible in areas such as agriculture and cross-border trade.

Agriculture and trade crises: Agriculture remains one of Pakistan's most important economic sectors, employing a substantial portion of the workforce and contributing significantly to exports. Yet the sector has faced repeated crises in recent years. Farmers have experienced volatile prices, rising input costs, and unpredictable policy interventions.

For example, bumper harvests of crops such as wheat, potatoes, and onions have periodically led to severe price crashes due to weak export coordination and inadequate storage infrastructure. In other seasons, adverse weather conditions have reduced yields and disrupted supply chains.

In a healthier civic ecosystem, such developments would likely trigger sustained policy debates. Farmers' associations, economists, and civil society organizations could collectively analyze the structural problems affecting agricultural markets and propose reforms addressing storage capacity, export policy, and pricing mechanisms. Instead, many of these crises have remained fragmented discussions occurring within narrow sectoral circles.

Trade policy illustrates a similar pattern. Pakistan's trade relations with neighboring countries have faced repeated disruptions over the past decade. Trade with India has remained suspended since 2019, while cross-border trade with Afghanistan has experienced periodic closures due to security and political tensions. As noted above, it is suspended since October 2025.

These decisions have profound implications for regional economies, particularly for traders, transporters, and farmers whose livelihoods depend on cross-border markets. Yet sustained public debate around the economic consequences of prolonged trade disruptions has been limited. Civil society organizations could have played an

¹⁴ <https://loksujag.com/story/pakistan-corporate-farming>

important role in translating these economic consequences into national policy discussions. However, weakened civic institutions and limited communication platforms have reduced the sector's ability to mobilize such debates.

Another dimension of capital-driven governance relates to land and resource allocation. Investment initiatives aimed at expanding corporate agriculture or developing mineral resources often involve large land transfers and long-term agreements with foreign investors. Such projects may have significant implications for local communities, environmental sustainability, and rural economies. In many countries, civil society organizations play an important role in ensuring that affected communities are consulted and that environmental standards are upheld.

In Pakistan, however, the combination of shrinking civic space, cautious media coverage, and centralized decision-making has limited such scrutiny. The result is not necessarily that all investment initiatives are problematic or unjustified. Rather, it is that the processes through which these decisions are debated have become narrower. When major economic choices, whether related to trade, agriculture, infrastructure, or natural resources, occur primarily within executive institutions, the space for broader public reasoning diminishes. This is precisely where the absence of a strong civil society becomes most visible. Civic actors are not expected to replace policymakers or economic planners. Their role is to ensure that decisions affecting millions of citizens are debated openly and informed by diverse perspectives. When that mediating role weakens, policymaking becomes increasingly insulated from societal scrutiny.

Section 5: Coalition-based civic action: What it can achieve and how to broaden it?

Pakistan's civic space has narrowed under political centralization, regulatory scrutiny, media transformation, and financial contraction. As discussed in previous sections, individual civil society organizations increasingly face risks when engaging with politically sensitive issues. The question, therefore, is not only how civil society can continue advocating for reforms but how it can retain relevance and maintain a civic voice in governance debates under constrained conditions. Coalition-based civic engagement offers one practical pathway to achieve this.

Larger thematic and geographic collectives can help reclaim relevance: Coalitions allow civil society to distribute voice and responsibility across multiple actors rather than concentrating advocacy within a single organization. When dozens of organizations, researchers, journalists, and professional bodies jointly raise an issue, the conversation shifts from being an organizational campaign to becoming a societal concern. Collective advocacy alters the political calculus around scrutiny of public policy. A statement issued by one organization can easily be ignored or targeted. A statement endorsed by dozens of organizations, professional associations, and civic actors becomes significantly harder to dismiss or isolate.

Coalitions therefore allow civil society to reclaim relevance by restoring its ability to collectively shape national conversations on governance issues, even when individual actors face constraints. Pakistan's own history offers several examples of how collective civic action has helped sustain public debate during politically restrictive periods. The Women's Action Forum (WAF), formed in 1981 during General Zia-ul-Haq's military regime, brought together lawyers, academics, journalists, and activists to challenge discriminatory legislation introduced under the regime's Islamization policies. Acting collectively enabled activists to organize protests, publish critiques, and pursue legal challenges at a time when individual dissent carried significant risk. More recently, the Lawyers' Movement (2007-2009) demonstrated how alliances between professional associations, civil society groups, and political actors could influence national political outcomes by successfully advocating for the restoration of the judiciary.

What coalitions can realistically achieve?

Coalition-based civic engagement should not be viewed as a substitute for political competition or democratic institutions. However, it can perform several critical functions in constrained environments.

- **Preserving non-violent civic discourse under repression:** Coalitions can help sustain spaces for non-violent public debate when political polarization and regulatory pressure discourage open discussion. By providing a collective platform for civic engagement, coalitions enable public concerns to be articulated without immediately triggering confrontation between individual actors and the state.
- **Inserting collective scrutiny into opaque policy decisions:** Coalitions can introduce civic scrutiny into policy areas that increasingly operate with limited public oversight. Major decisions regarding investment frameworks, agricultural markets, land allocations, or trade policies often emerge from centralized institutional processes. Civic coalitions can analyze such decisions, publish collective assessments, and encourage broader public debate.
- **Reducing individual exposure through shared authorship and positions:** When advocacy is undertaken collectively, responsibility does not rest on a single organization that can easily be targeted or pressured. Shared authorship of statements, reports, or petitions distributes risk among multiple actors. For example, allegations regarding extrajudicial actions by specialized law-enforcement units such as the Counter-Crime Department (CCD) in Punjab may circulate in media reports or community testimonies. Individual organizations may hesitate to pursue sustained advocacy on such issues because of potential repercussions. A coalition platform can address these concerns collectively by demanding transparency, investigation, or judicial oversight.
- **Re-establishing the legitimacy of civic speech through aggregation:** Another advantage of coalitions lies in restoring the social legitimacy of civic engagement. One recurring criticism directed at civil society in Pakistan is that it represents a narrow circle of professional organizations concentrated in major cities. When advocacy is undertaken collectively by diverse actors, it reflects a broader social base and becomes harder to portray as elitist or externally driven.

What coalitions cannot do?

While coalitions can play an important role in sustaining civic voice, they cannot replace the functions of political institutions. Coalitions are not the substitutes for political parties, electoral competition, or mass social movements.

Their purpose is not to compete with political actors but to preserve civic scrutiny and public reasoning, ensuring that governance decisions remain connected to societal realities. Coalitions become more credible and resilient when they include actors beyond traditional NGO networks. Civil society is broader than the development sector and includes many professional and social actors capable of contributing to governance debates. Effective coalitions should therefore incorporate a diverse range of participants, including:

- Lawyers and bar associations, who can provide legal expertise and institutional advocacy;
- Journalists and media collectives, who can amplify civic concerns and sustain public discussion;
- Traders, farmers, and professional associations, whose economic interests are directly affected by governance decisions; and
- Academics, researchers, and digital civic actors, who can contribute analysis, evidence, and communication strategies.

By incorporating such actors, coalitions can reconnect civic advocacy with wider societal constituencies.

- **Issue-based and time-bound participation:** Coalitions do not necessarily need to be permanent organizations. Many effective civic alliances operate on an issue-based and time-bound basis, allowing participants to collaborate on specific policy concerns without requiring long-term institutional commitments. This flexibility encourages broader participation by allowing actors to join coalitions when issues intersect with their expertise or interests.
- **Prioritizing constructive inputs on urgent issues:** Coalitions should focus on issues where civic scrutiny is most urgently needed. These may include governance decisions affecting large sections of society, such as agricultural policies, trade disruptions, investment agreements, or institutional reforms. Rather than positioning themselves solely as critics, coalitions can also contribute constructive policy inputs, evidence-based recommendations, and alternative policy options.
- **Online convening and collective public statements:** Digital technologies provide practical tools for coalition-based civic engagement. Online platforms enable meetings, document sharing, and collaborative drafting without requiring large institutional infrastructure. Coalitions can operate through virtual convening, shared documentation systems, and collective public statements endorsed by multiple organizations and individuals. Such approaches significantly reduce operational costs while expanding participation across geographic regions. A press release or policy statement endorsed by dozens of civic actors can generate greater public attention than isolated advocacy by individual organizations.
- **Coalitions as defensive civic infrastructure:** Ultimately, the coalition model proposed in this brief should be understood as a form of defensive civic infrastructure. The goal is not to build large new organizations or advocacy campaigns. Instead, coalitions provide a flexible platform through which civil society can sustain its presence in governance debates even when institutional space is limited. In this sense, coalition-based civic engagement focuses on survival, credibility, and continuity rather than visibility or growth. By preserving a collective civic voice, such coalitions ensure that critical governance decisions remain subject to public scrutiny and informed debate.

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About Accountability Lab Pakistan

Accountability Lab Pakistan (ALP) is a think-and-do tank focused on making governance work for people by supporting active citizens, responsible leaders, and accountable institutions. Our approach reimagines how accountability can be built and sustained, envisioning a governance ecosystem where resources are used effectively, decision-making is inclusive and evidence-based, and public institutions respond to citizen needs.

Distinct from traditional approaches, ALP positions accountability as a cross-cutting value embedded across governance systems. This includes work spanning public sector reform, civic engagement, human rights, service delivery, and institutional strengthening. Through knowledge production, leadership development, innovation and institutional reforms, ALP contributes to shaping more transparent, responsive, and resilient governance structures.

ALP's work is anchored in strengthening the relationship between citizens and the state by advancing institutional effectiveness, public trust, and inclusive governance. By integrating research, practice, and coalition-building, the Lab supports reform processes and contributes to a more accountable and responsive governance ecosystem in Pakistan.

