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Executive Summary

Pakistan entered May 2026 facing a convergence of political, economic, security, environmental, and governance pressures that collectively reflect a period of deep national uncertainty and structural strain. While the country has managed to avoid an immediate macroeconomic crisis through IMF-backed stabilization measures, external financing support, and tighter monetary controls, underlying vulnerabilities continue to intensify across nearly all major sectors.

Politically, rising inflation, fuel price increases, and public dissatisfaction with austerity-linked economic policies have strengthened opposition mobilisation and heightened tensions between the government and opposition alliances. At the same time, concerns regarding shrinking civic space, restrictions on dissent, and expanding regulatory controls over media and digital platforms continue to raise questions about democratic governance and institutional accountability.

Economically, Pakistan remains trapped between the need for growth and the risks associated with import dependence, inflation, and external financing pressures. The sharp rise in oil prices linked to regional geopolitical tensions has increased pressure on the trade deficit, inflation, and foreign exchange reserves. Although exports and financial sector indicators show partial resilience, structural weaknesses, including narrow tax collection, overreliance on debt inflows, weak industrial competitiveness, and low investment levels continue to undermine long-term economic stability.

The country's energy sector has come under additional stress due to rising global fuel prices, transmission inefficiencies, tariff disputes, and continued dependence on imported fossil fuels. Simultaneously, climate-related vulnerabilities have intensified, with heatwaves, flood warnings, glacial lake outburst risks, and growing water insecurity exposing the limited resilience of urban infrastructure, disaster preparedness systems, and environmental governance mechanisms.

Pakistan's humanitarian and social landscape also remains under severe pressure. Rising costs of living, weak public healthcare systems, labour exploitation, food insecurity, gender-based violence, and declining public trust in institutions continue to deepen social fragility. Public health concerns, including HIV outbreaks, lead contamination risks, and persistent polio cases, further highlight long-standing governance and service delivery failures.

At the regional and diplomatic level, Pakistan continues pursuing a pragmatic balancing strategy by strengthening ties with key regional and international partners while attempting to maintain economic and strategic relevance amid shifting geopolitical dynamics. However, worsening internal security conditions, including rising militant violence in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, continue to present major challenges to stability and governance.

Overall, sustainable stability will depend not only on short-term crisis management but on deeper structural reforms focused on governance, economic resilience, democratic accountability, and public welfare.

World Press Freedom Day

Every year, [World Press Freedom Day](#) serves as a reminder that a free press is not merely a democratic ideal; it is the backbone of accountability, transparency, and informed citizenship. In Pakistan, however, the day increasingly reflects not celebration but concern. The country's media landscape is confronting a multidimensional crisis shaped by legal restrictions, economic pressures, violence against journalists, digital censorship, and deepening political polarization.

Pakistan's decline in global press freedom rankings reflects this deterioration. According to the 2025 World Press Freedom Index by [Reporters Without Borders](#), Pakistan fell to 158th out of 180 countries, compared to 152nd in 2024. Although the 2026 index showed a marginal improvement to 153rd position, Pakistan remains categorized among countries where journalism operates under severe pressure.

The decline is not simply statistical; it reflects structural changes in the media environment. Journalists in Pakistan increasingly operate within a climate of fear and uncertainty. The threats are no longer limited to physical violence alone. [Legal intimidation](#), digital surveillance, coordinated online harassment, arbitrary arrests, economic coercion, and regulatory restrictions have become normalized tools for controlling narratives. The result is an ecosystem where self-censorship has become deeply embedded in newsroom culture.

One of the most alarming developments has been the expansion of the [Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act \(PECA\)](#). Amendments introduced in 2025 created stronger state powers to regulate online speech through tribunals, investigative authorities, and broad definitions of "false" or "fake" information. Journalistic bodies, including the [Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists \(PFUJ\)](#), argued that the amendments were designed less to combat misinformation and more to suppress dissent and intimidate independent journalism.

These developments are particularly significant because Pakistan's digital space has become one of the last relatively open arenas for independent expression after increasing pressures on mainstream television and print media. Restrictions on platform access, internet slowdowns, and legal action against digital journalists have now narrowed that space considerably. As traditional media outlets face political and commercial pressures, many journalists have shifted toward YouTube, X, and independent digital platforms for reporting. The state's growing regulatory focus on these platforms, therefore, represents an attempt to extend control into the digital sphere as well.

Violence against journalists remains another defining feature of Pakistan's press freedom crisis. Pakistan continues to be regarded internationally as one of the world's most dangerous countries for journalists. Since 2000, over [150 journalists](#) have reportedly been killed, while thousands have faced threats, attacks, abductions, arrests, or intimidation. In 2024 alone, at least seven journalists were killed, including reporters covering corruption, militancy, and local political networks. Many of these killings remain unresolved, reinforcing a culture of impunity.

The persistence of impunity is perhaps the most dangerous dimension of the crisis. When perpetrators are rarely prosecuted, violence becomes normalized as a mechanism of silencing journalists. This is particularly severe in conflict-affected regions such as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, where journalists face simultaneous threats from militant groups, criminal networks, and state-linked pressures. The risks are further magnified for women journalists, who increasingly face coordinated online harassment, gendered abuse, and disinformation campaigns aimed at discrediting their work.

Economic fragility has also become a major instrument of media control. Pakistan's media industry faces declining advertising revenues, dependence on government advertising, layoffs, delayed salaries, and financial instability. [RSF's 2025 report](#) highlighted that economic vulnerability is now one of the most significant threats to press freedom globally. In Pakistan, this vulnerability creates conditions where media organizations become more susceptible to political influence and editorial compromise.

Equally concerning is the growing homogenization of news content across television channels and newspapers. Analysts and media watchdogs have repeatedly pointed to increasing uniformity in political coverage, limited space for dissenting viewpoints, and the avoidance of sensitive topics involving security institutions, political elites, or governance failures. This narrowing of editorial diversity weakens democratic discourse because citizens receive [increasingly filtered](#) and cautious information rather than robust investigative journalism.

The implications extend far beyond journalists themselves. Weak press freedom directly undermines democratic accountability, anti-corruption efforts, human rights protection, and public trust in institutions. In contexts of economic instability, political polarization, terrorism, and climate vulnerability, societies require more credible journalism, not less. Restricting media freedom may temporarily manage narratives, but it ultimately deepens misinformation, public distrust, and institutional opacity.

On World Press Freedom Day, Pakistan faces a critical choice. The issue is no longer simply about media regulation; it concerns the future of democratic governance itself. Sustainable stability cannot emerge from controlled narratives and shrinking civic space. It requires an environment where journalists can investigate, question, and report without fear of violence, censorship, or retaliation.

A genuinely free press is not a threat to the state. It is one of the few institutions capable of strengthening public accountability, exposing governance failures, countering disinformation, and giving voice to marginalized communities. Pakistan's democratic future will depend significantly on whether it chooses to protect journalism as a public good or continue treating independent reporting as a political liability.

Political Updates

The first half of May 2026 has been marked by rising political tension in Pakistan as worsening economic pressures, fuel price increases, and governance concerns fuel opposition mobilisation and public frustration.

The sharp increase in petroleum prices became the immediate trigger for renewed opposition activity. Following another major fuel price hike driven largely by increased petroleum levies, the [Tehreek Tahaffuz-e-Ayeen Pakistan \(TTAP\)](#) alliance announced plans for a nationwide protest movement against what it described as “anti-people economic policies.” TTAP confirmed ongoing coordination with [PTI](#) and consultations with other opposition parties, including [JUI-F](#), to develop a broader anti-government campaign. The opposition argued that the government had intensified inflation through taxation rather than international oil price movements alone, linking rising fuel prices directly to transport costs, food inflation and unemployment pressures.



Source: Tribune

The political significance of these developments lies less in the immediate protests themselves and more in the gradual convergence of opposition narratives around economic governance. After months of fragmented political positioning, inflation, fuel prices and IMF-linked austerity are increasingly emerging as common rallying points across opposition groups.

At the same time, the Ministry of Finance directed ministries and government departments to surrender [unspent funds](#) ahead of schedule as part of efforts to finalise revised fiscal estimates and maintain budgetary control. The move reflects growing pressure on public finances following rising fuel import costs, subsidy requirements and IMF-related fiscal commitments. However, the decision has also exposed tensions within public spending priorities.



Source: Dawn News

A significant portion of the [Public Sector Development Programme \(PSDP\)](#) has already been reallocated to manage fuel-related pressures after the Middle East conflict sharply increased Pakistan’s oil import bill. While overall PSDP utilisation remained below half of allocated spending during the first nine months of FY26, allocations linked to parliamentarians’ development schemes reportedly saw unusually rapid utilisation. This contrast is likely to reinforce criticism from opposition parties and governance observers regarding political patronage, spending priorities and uneven development management during a period of fiscal stress.

Meanwhile, policy debates surrounding economic regulation and provincial autonomy also resurfaced during the period, particularly in relation to the [sugar sector](#). Sindh's resistance to federal proposals for deregulating sugar pricing highlighted broader federal-provincial tensions regarding economic governance after the [18th Amendment](#). Provincial authorities argued that complete deregulation could disproportionately benefit mill owners while weakening protections for farmers in an already highly concentrated and politically influential sector. The debate also reflects wider concerns about cartelisation, market manipulation and the state's limited capacity to regulate politically connected industries.

Economic Updates

Pakistan's economy has entered a more complicated phase in which the earlier narrative of gradual stabilisation is being tested by renewed inflation, widening external pressures, weak revenue mobilisation and the spillover effects of the Middle East conflict. The April trade data captures this tension clearly: exports recovered by [14.03 per cent](#) year-on-year to [\\$2.48 billion](#), but imports surged to \$6.55 billion, pushing the monthly trade deficit to \$4.07 billion and the 10-month FY26 [deficit](#) to around \$31.98 billion. This means Pakistan is once again confronting its familiar growth trap: whenever economic activity revives, [imports rise faster than exports](#), putting pressure on foreign exchange reserves and policy confidence.



Source: Dawn News

The external account is especially exposed because the latest import surge is not merely demand-driven; it is being amplified by higher oil prices, freight disruptions and shipping uncertainty linked to the Iran-US conflict. Pakistan imports nearly 85 per cent of its oil requirement, making any sustained increase in international oil prices immediately inflationary and a negative balance-of-payments shock. Analysts have warned that if oil prices remain elevated, inflation could remain in [double digits](#), the current account deficit could widen sharply, and FY27 GDP growth may slow to [2.5-3.0 per cent](#), down from earlier expectations of around 4 per cent. This is why the State Bank's [100 basis point rate hike](#) to [11.5 percent](#) should be read less as a routine monetary adjustment and more as a defensive move to protect exchange rate confidence, contain inflation expectations and preserve fragile reserves. However, the cost is clear: higher borrowing costs will weaken investment appetite, hurt SMEs and slow sectors such as manufacturing and construction that were only beginning to regain momentum.

Critically, these developments are unfolding at a time when Pakistan is also seeking to leverage its geopolitical positioning for economic and diplomatic gains. The contrast is striking: externally, the state projects itself as a credible mediator and [stabilising actor](#); internally, it continues to grapple with institutional inefficiencies, contested reforms, and uneven governance outcomes. The policy dilemma is severe: fully passing on energy costs protects fiscal targets and avoids supply-chain arrears, but it directly erodes purchasing power. Holding prices down, on the other hand, weakens petroleum levy collection and risks fiscal slippage.

This tension is visible in the [FBR's growing shortfall](#), estimated at around [Rs648-684 billion](#) in the first ten months of FY26, while petroleum levy collection remains a key instrument for maintaining the IMF-aligned primary surplus. The problem is that revenue policy continues to rely on the same visible taxpayers, formal businesses, salaried individuals and petroleum consumers, rather than expanding the real tax base.

This [tax approach](#) is increasingly counterproductive. Pakistan's fiscal system is extracting more from the documented economy while leaving large informal, retail, real estate, agricultural and services segments [under-taxed](#). The result is a vicious cycle: higher rates encourage informality; informality narrows the tax base; and the state responds by imposing still more levies, withholding taxes, surcharges and compliance burdens on those already inside the system. This not only [weakens fairness](#) but also discourages capital formation at a time when investment-to-GDP is already dangerously low. The overuse of super tax, retrospective collection and layered taxation on corporate structures may help close [short-term fiscal gaps](#), but it damages long-term competitiveness and investor confidence. For a deeper review, [one of our recent publications](#) goes into further detail about the tax system in Pakistan and its bottlenecks.

In comparison, the financial sector offers a partial cushion but not a substitute for real-sector strength. The sector grew by [15.1 percent in CY25](#), bank assets expanded by 17.8 percent, capital adequacy improved to 20.8 percent, and non-performing loans declined to 6.1 percent. Yet this apparent strength is heavily linked to banks' investment in government securities rather than broad-based private-sector credit expansion. In other words, the banking system remains stable, but it is still more closely tied to financing the state than financing productive enterprise. This reinforces the deeper structural problem: Pakistan has liquidity for government debt, but not enough patient capital for industrial upgrading, export diversification, technology adoption and SME growth.



Source: The Diplomatic Insight

Foreign inflows have improved, but their composition also raises caution. Foreign economic assistance rose nearly [20 percent](#) to \$6.594 billion in nine months of FY26, and total inflows exceeded \$9.7 billion when IMF disbursements and Saudi deposits are included. This has helped stabilise reserves and manage repayments. But the reliance on programme loans, deposits and friendly-country support shows that Pakistan's external stability remains financed more by debt and rollovers than by durable export earnings or [high-quality FDI](#). The sharp exit of foreign investors from [T-bills](#), with over [94 percent](#) of foreign investment leaving by mid-April, also shows how quickly portfolio confidence can reverse under geopolitical stress. This is not a sustainable external financing model.

The deeper vulnerability lies in Pakistan's dependence on the Gulf region. More than half of remittances come from [GCC countries](#), and recent external support has also become increasingly concentrated in Saudi financing after Pakistan reportedly returned UAE deposits. This creates a concentration risk across remittances, deposits, labour migration and investment sentiment. If Gulf economies slow, labour demand weakens, visa restrictions increase, or remittance flows soften, Pakistan's current account cushion could weaken quickly. Remittances have been financing a large share of the trade imbalance; any decline would force either sharper import compression or renewed borrowing. Both would hurt growth.

There are, however, emerging openings that should not be ignored. The arrival of Pakistan's first fully [transshipment cargo vessel at Karachi Port](#), increased container handling at Karachi and Port Qasim, and early activity at Gwadar suggest that regional disruption has created a narrow opportunity for Pakistan to position itself as a logistics and transshipment node. But this will only matter if it is converted into a coherent strategy: lower port costs, faster customs clearance, predictable regulation, digitised cargo handling, and reliable inland connectivity. Otherwise, the current gains will remain crisis-driven and temporary rather than becoming a durable source of trade competitiveness.



Source: Arab News

Pakistan has avoided a full-blown external crisis for now, supported by IMF inflows, remittances, Saudi deposits and tighter monetary management. But the economy remains trapped between the need for growth and the fear that growth will again widen the trade deficit, revive inflation and pressure the rupee. The immediate policy priority should therefore not be growth at any cost, nor stability through permanent compression. It should be disciplined, investment-oriented stabilisation: broadening the tax base instead of overtaxing the formal sector; protecting vulnerable households without distorting energy prices; supporting exports through competitiveness rather than subsidies alone; reducing avoidable imports through domestic manufacturing; and using the current geopolitical moment to attract productive investment rather than short-term financial inflows. Without such a shift, Pakistan's recovery will remain vulnerable to every oil shock, every import surge and every external financing delay.

Energy Sector Updates

Pakistan's energy sector is facing one of its most difficult periods in recent years as global geopolitical tensions, domestic tariff pressures, structural inefficiencies and unresolved regulatory disputes converge into a broader energy security challenge. What initially appeared to be a temporary shock triggered by the Iran-US conflict is increasingly [exposing deeper weaknesses](#) that have accumulated over decades: excessive dependence on imported fuel, delayed infrastructure reforms, transmission bottlenecks, circular debt, pricing distortions and an inability to build resilience against external shocks.

The most immediate pressure is coming from oil markets. With uncertainty surrounding the Strait of Hormuz and disruptions in Gulf shipping routes, Pakistan's oil import bill has reportedly surged from approximately [\\$300 million per week](#) to nearly [\\$800 million](#), sharply increasing pressure on the external account, inflation and domestic fuel prices. This shock is particularly severe because Pakistan imports the overwhelming majority of its petroleum requirements, making global energy volatility almost instantly transmissible into domestic transport, electricity, agriculture and manufacturing costs. Analysts estimate that every \$5 increase in crude oil prices adds nearly \$1 billion to Pakistan's annual import bill, while every \$10 increase significantly accelerates inflationary pressures.

The government's latest fuel price adjustments reflect this difficult balancing act between fiscal commitments and consumer affordability. Petrol and diesel prices were increased by up to **Rs15 per litre** after the government sharply raised petroleum levies to satisfy **IMF revenue conditions**. The petroleum levy on petrol climbed to Rs117.41 per litre, while the levy on high-speed diesel rose to Rs42.60 per litre. The government's dilemma is evident: fully passing global prices to consumers intensifies inflation and public hardship, while absorbing costs through subsidies threatens fiscal targets and risks widening macroeconomic imbalances.



Source: Business Recorder

The crisis has also renewed debate over Pakistan's long-term energy model. Several analysts and policy studies now argue that the country's vulnerability is not simply the result of war-related disruptions, but rather the outcome of decades of **structural policy failures**. Pakistan remains heavily dependent on imported fossil fuels, rigid LNG arrangements and expensive fuel-based generation while lacking strategic oil reserves, utility-scale storage systems and a modernised transmission network. This dependence has become increasingly dangerous in an era of geopolitical instability where energy supply chains can be disrupted overnight.

One of the most alarming revelations during the current crisis is that Pakistan remains the only major country in the region without **strategic oil reserves**. The government is now reportedly considering joint ventures with Saudi Arabia to establish strategic oil storage facilities in Gwadar and Karachi, while discussions are also underway regarding the revival of Saudi investment in the long-delayed Gwadar refinery project. The closure risks surrounding the Strait of Hormuz have further strengthened the strategic relevance of Gwadar as an alternative regional energy and logistics corridor. Policymakers are also revisiting earlier proposals from Azerbaijan and the UAE to support **oil storage infrastructure**, as well as proposals for gas storage in depleted wells to reduce vulnerability to LNG shortages during crises.



Source: Pexels

At the same time, Pakistan's power sector itself remains caught between tariff turbulence and structural reform. Public hearings before **NEPRA** regarding K-Electric's multi-year **tariff adjustments** exposed growing frustration among Karachi's industrial stakeholders, who warned that high electricity costs and prolonged regulatory uncertainty are forcing industries either to shut down or relocate from the city. Industrial representatives argued that unresolved tariff disputes, delayed regulatory decisions and unpredictable energy costs are eroding investor confidence and undermining Karachi's manufacturing and export base. Concerns were also raised that the handling of K-Electric's regulatory disputes could negatively affect future privatisation efforts for other distribution companies. The episode reflects a broader challenge within Pakistan's energy governance structure: balancing investor confidence, consumer protection and utility financial sustainability simultaneously.

More fundamentally, Pakistan's energy debate is increasingly shifting from generation shortages toward system management challenges. Installed generation capacity has expanded significantly over the years and is theoretically sufficient to meet demand. However, the real constraints now lie in [transmission, distribution and network management](#). The rapid growth of distributed solar generation, changes in demand patterns and debates around net metering, fixed capacity charges and tariff restructuring indicate that Pakistan's power sector is undergoing a deeper structural transition. Policymakers are attempting to redesign tariff systems to recover infrastructure costs more effectively as consumption behaviour changes, particularly with the growth of rooftop solar and distributed generation. Yet these reforms are unfolding faster than public understanding, generating confusion, resistance and policy uncertainty.

Renewable energy nevertheless remains one of the few areas offering a genuine strategic opportunity. Pakistan's rapid solar expansion - estimated at around 34 gigawatts by 2025 - has already provided an important buffer against imported fuel dependence. However, the absence of large-scale battery storage means solar power cannot yet solve the country's evening peak demand crisis, when conventional generation and imported LNG remain essential. Energy experts increasingly argue that investment in battery storage, grid modernisation and transmission infrastructure is now more critical than simply adding new generation capacity. The current crisis is therefore accelerating calls for a more diversified and resilient energy mix based on solar, hydro, wind and domestic system flexibility rather than continued dependence on imported fuels.

Environmental Updates

Early May 2026 has exposed Pakistan's climate crisis as a layered emergency rather than a series of isolated weather events. The immediate concern came from the [National Disaster Management Authority's](#) warning for [May 12-17](#), which forecast widespread rain, thunderstorms, hailstorms, flash floods and landslides across vulnerable regions. The Pakistan Meteorological Department also issued a GLOF alert for KP and Gilgit-Baltistan, identifying high-risk areas including Swat, Chitral, Dir, Kohistan, Hunza, Nagar, Ghizer, Shigar and Astore. This combination of rain, glacial instability and mountainous terrain reflects one of Pakistan's most dangerous climate patterns: communities are not only exposed to heavy precipitation but also to sudden, high-impact disasters triggered by glacier melt and unstable water flows.



Source: World Bank

At the same time, southern Pakistan faced the opposite extreme. Karachi recorded temperatures of around [42-44°C](#), with hospitals reporting hundreds of [heat-related cases](#), including dehydration, heat exhaustion, diarrhoea and complications among elderly people. Reported deaths linked to heatstroke show how urban climate risk is now becoming a public health emergency. The crisis is worsened by poor urban planning, damaged roads, traffic congestion, lack of heat shelters and limited public-level preparedness. In practical terms, heat is no longer simply a weather condition; it is a stress test of [city governance](#).

Water insecurity remains equally alarming. Pakistan's storage capacity of around **90 days** remains far below regional and global benchmarks, while Irsa has warned of reduced water availability for **provinces**. This is not only a question of scarcity but also mismanagement and contamination. Pollution in the Ravi, Sutlej, Manchar Lake, Kabul, Swat and lower Indus systems shows that Pakistan is weakening the very water systems on which its agriculture, food security and public health depend. A country facing climate-induced water stress cannot afford to treat its rivers as drains for untreated sewage, industrial waste and agricultural runoff.

In this backdrop, organized by the Dawn media group, the **Breathe Pakistan Climate Change Conference** provided an important national platform. Though its discussions also revealed the familiar gap between climate awareness and implementation. Speakers rightly emphasised resilience, adaptation, water security, climate-smart cities, energy transition and inclusion of women, youth and vulnerable communities.



Source: Dawn News

Finance Minister Muhammad Aurangzeb's argument that Pakistan has some domestic fiscal space for climate response is important because it shifted the debate from donor dependency to domestic prioritisation. However, the real test is whether climate resilience will be embedded into budgets, infrastructure, health systems, agriculture policy and local government planning, rather than remaining confined to conferences and policy statements.

A deeper concern is Pakistan's human resilience deficit. Climate vulnerability is not only about weak embankments, poor drainage or insufficient funds; it is also about education, skills, early-warning literacy and institutional capacity. As **Ali Tauqeer Sheikh argues**, credible climate resilience depends on layered human capital, beginning with basic literacy and extending to technical skills, applied STEM and innovation systems. Pakistan's **26 million** out-of-school children represent not only an education crisis but also a future climate vulnerability, because communities with weak literacy and limited adaptive capacity are less able to process warnings, protect livelihoods or recover from disasters.



Source: Al Jazeera

The policy lesson is clear. Pakistan cannot treat climate change as an environmental side issue. It must be approached as core **economic governance**, requiring early warning systems, local preparedness, water reform, resilient urban planning, climate-sensitive budgeting, public health readiness and long-term investment in human capital.

Social and Humanitarian Updates

Pakistan today is not merely facing an economic or political crisis; it is confronting a deepening social and humanitarian emergency shaped by institutional fragility, widening inequality, public health failures, shrinking civic freedoms, and persistent insecurity. The [Human Rights Commission of Pakistan's 2025](#) report paints an alarming picture of a country where democratic space, human rights protections, and social safeguards are rapidly eroding. Pakistan ranked [130th out of 143 countries](#) in the enforcement of fundamental rights, while gender-based violence increased by 25% in a single year. At least 470 women were killed in the name of "honour," and more than 2,500 cases of cyber harassment against women were reported.



Source: Pakistan Today

Simultaneously, new legislation such as the [Punjab High Security Zones Bill 2026](#) has significantly expanded state powers to restrict protests, public gatherings, and dissent, reflecting an increasingly securitized governance model where public expression is treated as a threat rather than a democratic right. Human rights organizations, journalists, and civil society actors have warned that the cumulative effect of such measures is the gradual normalization of fear, self-censorship, and authoritarian governance.

The country's public health landscape is equally troubling and reveals the consequences of decades of underinvestment, weak regulation, and governance failures. Pakistan's [HIV crisis](#) has evolved from a public health concern into what experts now describe as a "[man-made epidemic](#)," driven not primarily by high-risk behaviour but by systemic failures within the healthcare system itself. Unsafe injections, reuse of syringes, weak infection control, and poor oversight have contributed to outbreaks affecting even children. Official figures indicate over 84,000 registered HIV cases, with nearly [23,000 patients](#) now untraceable within the treatment system.



Source: The Reporters

At the same time, Pakistan continues to battle [polio](#), remaining one of only two countries in the world where the disease persists. Adding to the crisis, a joint UNICEF and Ministry of Health study found that nearly [40%](#) of children in high-risk industrial areas across seven cities had [elevated lead levels](#) in their blood, exposing an environmental health catastrophe with potentially irreversible impacts on cognitive development, learning capacity, and long-term economic productivity. These overlapping crises reveal a state struggling to provide even the most basic protections for children and vulnerable populations.

Economic pressures are intensifying the humanitarian burden on ordinary households. Rising inflation, increasing medicine costs, food insecurity, and labour exploitation are pushing millions closer to survival-level existence. Reports from across major cities show that medicine prices have risen by [50-75%](#) over the past two years, while public hospitals increasingly face shortages of essential drugs. Patients suffering from diabetes, heart disease, and chronic illnesses are now skipping treatment because they simply cannot afford medicines. Meanwhile, labour protections remain largely ineffective despite thousands of inspections and legal notices. In Faisalabad alone, authorities conducted more than [27,000 labour inspections](#) over 18 months, yet not a single conviction was secured for labour violations, child labour, or workplace safety abuses. Such figures highlight not only enforcement failure but also the deep structural impunity that protects powerful industrial actors while leaving workers vulnerable to exploitation, unsafe conditions, and wages below legal minimums.

Food security and climate vulnerability further expose Pakistan's fragile social foundations. The [FAO's 2026 Global Report on Food Crises](#) ranked Pakistan among the countries with the world's largest populations facing acute food insecurity. Climate shocks, water insecurity, rising fertilizer costs, and uncertainty surrounding the Indus Waters Treaty are placing immense pressure on an already unstable agricultural system. Policymaking remains reactive and inconsistent, as seen in repeated reversals on wheat procurement policies that have harmed both farmers and consumers.



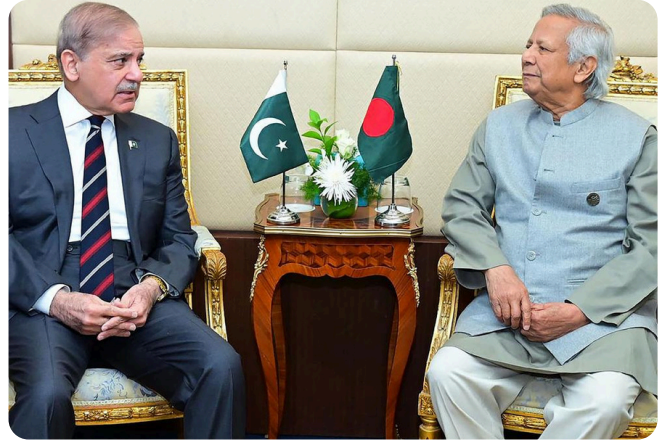
Source: South Asia Times

Perhaps the most concerning dimension of Pakistan's current trajectory is the simultaneous weakening of accountability institutions and civic space at a time when public trust is already dangerously low. Journalists, activists, lawyers, and opposition voices increasingly face intimidation, arrests, enforced disappearances, legal harassment, and digital surveillance under expanded cybercrime and anti-terror legislation. [Media organizations](#) face financial pressure and censorship, while citizens encounter growing [restrictions](#) on assembly and speech. The result is a shrinking democratic space precisely when society most urgently requires transparency, public debate, and institutional accountability to address its mounting crises. Pakistan's social and humanitarian landscape, therefore, reflects more than policy failures; it reveals a widening disconnect between the state and its citizens. Without serious structural reforms, investment in public welfare, and restoration of democratic freedoms, the country risks moving toward a cycle where insecurity, inequality, institutional distrust, and social fragmentation reinforce one another with increasingly destabilizing consequences.

Diplomatic Landscape

Pakistan's diplomatic landscape in early May 2026 reflects a country attempting to reposition itself as a pragmatic regional actor at a time of profound geopolitical flux. One of the most notable developments has been the rapid warming of [Pakistan-Bangladesh relations](#) after years of diplomatic stagnation. High-level engagements in Dhaka, including Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi's visit, have renewed commitments to expand trade, cultural exchange, and institutional cooperation, signalling a deliberate effort by both countries to normalize ties beyond the historical baggage of 1971.

Bilateral trade has already crossed the [\\$1 billion](#) mark following a reported 20% increase, aided by improved shipping and aviation links. This rapprochement carries significance beyond economics. For Pakistan, improved ties with Bangladesh represent an attempt to rebuild relevance in South Asia at a time when SAARC remains largely dysfunctional, and India continues to dominate the regional diplomatic space. The warming ties also illustrate how economic pragmatism is gradually beginning to outweigh historical hostility in regional diplomacy.



Source: Kashmir Media Service

At the same time, Pakistan's handling of India's unilateral move to place the [Indus Waters Treaty](#) "in abeyance" further reinforced this approach, with Islamabad deliberately emphasizing international law, treaty mechanisms, and multilateral engagement instead of escalation. Simultaneously, the arrival of a high-level Iranian trade delegation in Gwadar shows the strategic importance of the [Gwadar-Chabahar dynamic](#). Rather than purely rival ports, there are growing indications that both sides increasingly view them as potentially complementary regional logistics and transit hubs. This is a broader regional trend where economic connectivity is becoming inseparable from geopolitical positioning. Pakistan's challenge, however, lies in converting diplomatic visibility into sustained economic and strategic gains without becoming overexposed to regional rivalries.

Economically, Pakistan's diplomacy is increasingly centered on resilience-building through external partnerships and strategic investment flows. The European Union's announcement of €160 million in Global Gateway investments - including [€100 million](#) for Sindh flood reconstruction and €60 million for Karachi water infrastructure - demonstrates that climate resilience and infrastructure diplomacy are becoming central pillars of Pakistan's international partnerships.

At the same time, China remains Pakistan's most critical long-term strategic and economic anchor through the evolving [second phase of CPEC](#), which seeks to shift focus from infrastructure toward industrialization and export competitiveness. Yet major structural weaknesses remain. Questions surrounding the operational viability of Special Economic Zones, institutional fragmentation, weak regulatory environments, and inconsistent economic policymaking continue to undermine investor confidence. Concerns over Gulf investment reviews, including reports that the UAE's Etisalat may reassess its [PTCL exposure](#), further reveal the fragile nature of Pakistan's external economic dependencies.



Source: Tribune

Islamabad's foreign policy is increasingly shaped by a strategy of "multi-vector balancing" - simultaneously deepening ties with China, cautiously rebuilding relations with neighboring states, maintaining strategic relevance for Western powers, and leveraging its geographic position amid intensifying regional instability.

Security Updates

Pakistan's security environment deteriorated further in early May 2026 following a deadly car bombing at a police post in Bannu that killed [12 policemen](#) and injured several others. The attack, followed by an armed militant assault, underscored the continued operational strength of militant networks in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa despite ongoing counterterrorism campaigns. The incident came amid a broader surge in violence across the country. Recent security data shows a sharp increase in militant attacks and fatalities between late 2025 and early 2026, with groups such as Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K), and affiliated factions intensifying operations in both Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan. Security analysts have also noted the growing use of drones, quadcopters, and cross-border infiltration tactics, indicating a significant evolution in militant capabilities and operational methods.



Source: Reuters

At the same time, Pakistan's internal security debate has expanded beyond militancy alone and increasingly overlaps with questions of governance, political stability, and constitutional rights. The state has responded to rising insecurity with tougher counterterrorism measures, expanded security powers, and greater restrictions on dissent and [political mobilization](#). However, critics argue that Pakistan now faces a dual crisis: a persistent militant threat alongside growing institutional polarization and weakening democratic space. The continuing tensions with Afghanistan, unresolved questions surrounding cross-border sanctuaries, and debates over [military trials of civilians](#) further complicate the landscape. Collectively, these developments suggest that Pakistan's security challenge is no longer purely military in nature; it has evolved into a broader test of state capacity, political legitimacy, regional diplomacy, and institutional resilience.

Reading Recommendations

- Battleground Algorithms: How Artificial Intelligence is Shaping Modern Conflict Narratives ([Click Here](#))
- Reimagining Civil Society Action in Pakistan ([Click Here](#))
- Building Digital Resilience of Civil Society ([Click Here](#))
- Why Pakistan's Entrepreneurial Landscape Has Struggled to Deliver for Its Youth: A Critical South Asian Comparison ([Click Here](#))
- Mental Health Access for Women: Cultural Stigma and Systemic Barriers ([Click Here](#))
- Concrete Over Canopy: The Unmaking of Islamabad's Green Capital Dream ([Click Here](#))
- Menstrual Health Management: Policy Gaps, Access to Hygiene Products and Cultural Taboos ([Click Here](#))
- Climate Change and Food Security in Pakistan: A Crisis on Our Plate ([Click Here](#))
- Environmental Health Risks: Gendered impacts of air pollution, water contamination, and climate change on women ([Click Here](#))
- Imagination as the Blueprint of Reality ([Click Here](#))
- Constitution for All: Rethinking Gender Inclusive Governance in Pakistan ([Click Here](#))
- Rethinking Reforms Process in Balochistan: Innovation and Leadership at BCSA ([Click Here](#))
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