4.1.3. Human rights defenders and activists

COMMON ANALYSIS
Last update: October 2026

A human rights defender is a person who, individually or in association with others, acts to promote or protect human rights in a structured and long-term commitment. Examples of human rights defenders include lawyers, members of human rights NGOs, academics, and trade unionists (7). A human rights activist is a person who believes strongly in political or social change based on the respect of human rights, such as the abolishment of the death penalty, and takes part in activities in a structured and long-term commitment to try to make this happen (8). Such activities include protests, strikes, boycotts, online campaigns, volunteer activities, etc. (9).

Human rights activism also covers, for example, advocacy for the rights of ethnic and religious minorities, persons with diverse SOGIESC, as well as women's rights. Human rights lawyers act to protect human rights and advocate for the rights of their clients, including against ill-treatment by the authorities.

This profile should be read in conjunction with 4.1.2. Protesters.

The analysis below is based on the following EUAA COI products: COI Update 2026, 1.; Country Focus 2026, 6.1.7.; Country Focus 2024, 6.4.2.; Country Guidance should not be referred to as a source of COI.

Despite government regulations that have rendered many civil society organisations (CSOs) in Pakistan dormant, the country still retains a sizeable not-for-profit sector employing thousands of people. The sector has expanded in recent years in both reach and functions. Efforts to secure accountability for abuses against human rights defenders and activists have made little headway before the courts or in parliament, while restrictions on CSOs, peaceful assembly, and digital spaces remain substantial nationwide. On 5 March 2024, the CIVICUS Monitor added Pakistan to its watchlist of countries experiencing rapid declines in civic freedoms.

Pashtun parties and movements such as the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) advocate for Pasthun rights and criticise the military operations in KP. On 6 October 2024, the Pakistani government listed PTM as a proscribed organisation under the Anti-Terrorism Act.

While there are some organisations actively supporting SOGIESC rights in Pakistan, including by providing them with legal aid, progress has been slow and met with significant societal resistance.

Step 1: Do the reported acts amount to persecution?

Some acts to which human rights defenders and activists could be subjected are of such a severe nature that they would amount to persecution. More specifically, reports describe extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, attacks, and arbitrary detention against activists and other critical voices by the military, intelligence agencies, other state authorities and non-state actors.

In August 2024, a leader of PTM, Ali Wazir, was arrested in Islamabad on fabricated charges and detained until December 2024. The torture and killing of a prominent Pashtun activist and leader of PTM, Hazrat Naeem (known as Gilaman Wazir), were also reported. The PTM remained banned as per the Peshawar High Court order issued in February 2026.

There have been instances of detention, arrest, and repeated First Information Reports (FIRs) against human rights lawyers. In some cases, individuals have been arrested and sentenced to up to 17 years' imprisonment under the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA).

The severity and/or repetitiveness of other acts that human rights defenders and activists could be subjected to and whether they occur as an accumulation of various measures should also be considered. More specifically, human rights defenders and activists face harassment, mass surveillance, censorship, travel bans, and other threats.

Step 2: What is the level of risk of persecution?

A well-founded fear of persecution would in general be substantiated for leaders and prominent members of PTM and groups advocating for Baloch rights, considering the severe repression by the Pakistani authorities against the movements.

The individual assessment of whether there is a reasonable degree of likelihood for **other human rights defenders and activists** to face persecution should take into account **risk-impacting circumstances**, such as:

- **Topics:** human rights defenders and activists speaking out against human rights violations (such as against enforced disappearances in Balochistan), against military operations by the authorities (such as security operations in KP and Balochistan), for separatism (such as in Balochistan), and/or reporting on ongoing protests (for example protests in Pakistan-administered Kashmir) face a high risk. Activists working on SOGIESC rights are exposed to a high risk as they can be seen ‘as promoting same-sex relationships’. See also Individuals (perceived as) transgressing Islamic norms and Persons with diverse SOGIESC.

- **Geographical area of activity:** human rights defenders and activists from conflict-affected areas, particularly certain parts of KP (especially the former FATA) and Balochistan, face a higher risk as extremist groups operate in such areas.

Step 3: Is there a ground for persecution?

Where well-founded fear of persecution is substantiated for an applicant under this profile this is highly likely to be for reasons of **political opinion**, especially if the Pakistani authorities can link their activities to advocacy for ethnic minority rights. In such a situation, it is not important whether the activities are aimed solely at providing social assistance as the Pakistani authorities may view these activities as opposition to the current government. Persecution may also be for reasons of **religion**, as advocating for SOGIESC rights is seen by extremist groups as anti-Islamic.

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  European Union External Action Service, Human rights defenders, consulted 4 August 2026.

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  Adaptation based on Cambridge Dictionary.

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  Liberties, Democracy and Justice, 'What is Activism: Definition, Types, Role, Examples, Importance', consulted 4 August 2026.

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