

Pakistan: End Internet Shutdown and Arbitrary Arrests

(Bangkok/Kathmandu, 12 May 2023) - The Asian Forum For Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) expresses its deep concern over the worsening human rights situation in Pakistan, including reports of [violent protests](#), mass arrests, fatalities, and [internet shutdowns](#) following the arrest of former prime minister Imran Khan. Khan's arrest is the latest in Pakistan's ongoing political turmoil and crackdown against the political opposition, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI).

'We urge the government of Pakistan to uphold human rights and the rule of law during these turbulent times. The government must respond to the ongoing protests with proportionate and restrained measures, aiming to de-escalate the situation instead of exacerbating it. Pakistan must respect the right to peaceful assembly and expression, including the right to access the internet and information,' said Mary Aileen Diez-Bacalso, Executive Director, FORUM-ASIA.

Imran Khan was [arrested](#) on 8 May 2023, by paramilitary troops within the premises of the Islamabad courthouse on corruption charges, and later released from custody on 11 May 2023 on the orders of the Supreme Court which ruled his arrest to be ['illegal'](#). Subsequently, violent protests broke out across the country, which the government has responded to with excessive force, arbitrary arrests, and multiple human and digital rights violations.

In response to these protests, the government enforced [Section 144](#) of the Criminal Procedure Code in major cities of Pakistan, which prohibits public gatherings. In addition, armed forces were deployed to maintain law and order. To disperse protestors, the troops used tear gas and water cannons. They also fired directly at the demonstrators, resulting in numerous injuries and even deaths. [Thousands](#) of protestors, alongside PTI's senior leaders, have been arbitrarily arrested in overnight raids and at least [10](#) people have lost their lives in the nationwide protests.

Furthermore, the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) has also suspended mobile internet services [indefinitely](#) across the country. Social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram are [reportedly down](#) for many users. Such internet and social media restrictions heavily curb people's fundamental rights of access to information and expression as guaranteed by Pakistan's Constitution (Article 19) and international legal obligations. Internet

shutdowns also hinder the ability of citizens to obtain healthcare, education, and livelihoods.

FORUM-ASIA calls on the Government of Pakistan to uphold its obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and ensure its people's constitutionally guaranteed fundamental freedoms of expression, access to information, and the right to peaceful assembly. These rights must be protected and promoted both online and offline.

We urge the government to restore access to the Internet and social media as shutdowns are a violation of digital rights and should never be used as a tool to further restrict fundamental freedoms. We also call upon the authorities to ensure that democracy and the rule of law remain uncompromised and to refrain from using the military in response to peaceful protests.

About FORUM-ASIA:

The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) is a network of 85 member organisations across 23 countries, mainly in Asia. Founded in 1991, FORUM-ASIA works to strengthen movements for human rights and sustainable development through research, advocacy, capacity development and solidarity actions in Asia and beyond. It has consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council, and consultative relationship with the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights. The FORUM-ASIA Secretariat is based in Bangkok, with offices in Jakarta, Geneva and Kathmandu. www.forum-asia.org

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