

Pakistan: Arbitrary arrest and sentencing of human rights lawyers Imaan Zainab Mazari-Hazir and Hadi Ali Chattha

29 January 2026

The undersigned organisations strongly condemn the arbitrary arrest and subsequent conviction of Pakistani human rights lawyers Imaan Zainab Mazari-Hazir and Hadi Ali Chattha and call for their immediate release and measures to ensure the conviction is set aside. On 24 January, a District and Sessions Court in Islamabad sentenced the lawyers to 17 years' imprisonment and Rs. 36 million fines each over alleged "anti-state" social media posts, following their arrest the previous day. This constitutes the latest escalation in a pattern of continued harassment against the couple in retaliation for the legitimate exercise of their human rights and professional functions.

Imaan Zainab Mazari-Hazir is a human rights lawyer who has represented victims of enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings, and custodial abuse, frequently challenging the legality of state practices. Her husband, Hadi Ali Chattha, is a human rights lawyer and criminal law specialist who has defended individuals facing spurious charges of blasphemy and provided pro bono legal support in cases involving sexual violence, enforced disappearances, and death row prisoners. Both lawyers have faced targeted reprisals, including harassment through judicial processes, for their human rights and legal work, as well as for their outspoken advocacy for accountability and the rule of law.

Arbitrary arrest

On 23 January 2026, Islamabad police [arrested](#) Mazari and Chattha while they were travelling in the Islamabad High Court Bar Association's (IHCBA) vehicle to the District Sessions Court, accompanied by senior Bar representatives, for a hearing in the controversial '[tweets case](#)'. Police [reportedly](#) used undue force and failed to produce either an arrest warrant or a First Information Report (FIR), as required under applicable procedural law, before transferring them to an undisclosed location. Later that day, the couple was kept in a vehicle outside an anti-terrorism court and barred from entering, while proceedings were conducted behind closed doors in the absence of legal counsel.

The arrest occurred despite an order of the Islamabad High Court dated 21 January 2026, [granting](#) them temporary relief from arrest, reinstating bail, and guaranteeing the right to a complete defence, including cross-examination. Immediately after the High Court's 21 January decision, however, Pakistani police [invoked](#) a series of previously dormant and backdated FIRs, including a July 2025 terrorism charges case alleging Mazari and Chattha assaulted police during a protest – an allegation firmly denied by them. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) [expressed](#) "serious concern" over what it described as the continued harassment of Mazari and Chattha, noting that they were facing "yet another allegedly fabricated FIR". The couple spent the night sheltering at the Islamabad High Court Bar Association's office before again appearing in High Court, where they were [granted](#) two-day protective bail in the newly revived cases.

Sentencing and concerns over fair trial rights and detention conditions

On 24 January 2026, the Sessions Judge of the Islamabad-West Criminal Court sentenced Imaan Mazari and Hadi Ali Chattha to a combined 17 years' imprisonment and fines of Rs. 36 million each under sections 9 (glorification of an offence), 10 (cyber terrorism), and 26-A (false and fake information) of Pakistan's controversial Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) 2016 – a law widely [misused](#) to suppress online expression in Pakistan. The prosecution alleged that social

media posts published between 2021 and 2025 contained “anti-state” content, incited ethnic hatred, undermined public trust in state institutions, and falsely implicated the armed forces in terrorism and enforced disappearances.

The sentencing abruptly concluded proceedings that had been marred by due process violations. Although a transfer application [pending](#) before the Islamabad High Court legally deprived the Sessions Court of jurisdiction, it nevertheless proceeded to pass judgement. The sentencing followed shortly after the couple’s court appearance, which was conducted via video link from Adiala Jail and lasted less than one minute. During the brief appearance, Mazari [declared](#) that they would be boycotting the trial, alleging being subjected to torture and citing denial of food and water in detention. They were refused the opportunity to complete cross-examination of prosecution witnesses and had no access to legal counsel while in custody, raising serious concerns about their fair trial rights and physical well-being.

Weaponisation of the justice system

The arrest and sentencing of Imaan Mazari and Hadi Ali Chattha are emblematic of a broader trend of [judicial persecution](#) aimed at exhausting the lawyers’ time and resources, discrediting their work, and obstructing their ability to represent alleged victims of violent abuses perpetrated by state agents. The couple have faced multiple parallel criminal proceedings under anti-terrorism and blasphemy laws, repeated cancellations of bail, and the continued threat of arrest, all compounded by persistent concerns regarding due process violations. Repeated summonses in cases on baseless allegations have severely disrupted their legal practice and violated their human rights, forcing them to appear before multiple courts across the country, reportedly with the intent of diverting their attention from defending vulnerable clients.

The use of PECA 2016 in the ‘tweets case’ illustrates how the Pakistani authorities are weaponizing the justice system to punish dissent and target legitimate human rights work. Previously, on 15 January 2026, the District and Sessions Court [cancelled](#) Mazari and Chattha’s bail, curtailed their right to defence, and issued arrest warrants without meeting mandatory procedural requirements. Defence counsel further noted that Mazari was unwell at the time and that requests for adjournment were denied, with hearings conducted at an accelerated pace. Although the Islamabad High Court temporarily stayed the arrest and [granted](#) protective bail on 19 January 2026, the persistence of backdated FIRs and renewed arrest attempts that followed reflect a systematic strategy to intimidate, harass, and silence lawyers who defend victims of state violence and advocate for accountability for human rights violations.

The arbitrary arrest and continued detention of Mazari and Chattha, as well as the systematic harassment against them, have been widely condemned, notably by the [UN Special Rapporteur on the Independence of Judges and Lawyers](#), the [Human Rights Commission of Pakistan](#), the [Islamabad High Court Bar Association](#), the [Sindh High Court Bar Association](#), and [Islamabad Bar Council](#).

Pakistan must uphold its obligations under international law

In light of the above, the undersigned organisations call on Pakistan to respect and uphold its obligations under international law, particularly the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (UNCAT). It must also respect the United Nations Basic Principles on the Role of Lawyers. Lawyers should be able to perform their professional functions without intimidation, hindrance, harassment, or improper interference, and should not be prosecuted for

actions taken in accordance with their professional duties or for the legitimate exercise of freedom of expression.

We urge the Pakistani authorities to:

- Immediately and unconditionally release Imaan Zainab Mazari-Hazir and Hadi Ali Chattha and take measures to ensure the conviction is set aside, as it is based on their legitimate exercise of their human rights and professional functions;
- Ensure Imaan Zainab Mazari-Hazir's and Hadi Ali Chattha's safety in detention, including by protecting against torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment, and guarantee access to legal counsel, family members, food, water, and medical care;
- Conduct an immediate and effective inquiry into the excessive use of force by law enforcement officers during the arrest of the lawyers, and hold those responsible to account;
- Cease the misuse of laws such as the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act and the Anti-Terrorism Act against lawyers and human rights defenders exercising their human rights and fundamental freedoms protected by international law;
- Ensure that all lawyers and human rights defenders in Pakistan can perform their professional duties without fear of reprisals, harassment, or undue interference, in accordance with international standards.

The undersigned organisations express solidarity with Imaan Mazari and Hadi Chattha, as well as all other Pakistani lawyers and human rights defenders who face retaliation for their work and will continue to closely monitor developments in this case.

SIGNATORIES

Alliance for Lawyers at Risk
Asma Jahangir (AGHS) Legal Aid Cell
Avocats Européens Démocrates – European Democratic Lawyers
Balochistan Bar Council
Council of Bars and Law Societies of Europe (Conseil des Barreaux Européens, CCBE)
Défense Sans Frontière - Avocats Solidaires (DSF-AS)
Democratic Lawyers of Switzerland
European Association of Lawyers for Democracy and World Human Rights (ELDH)
Foundation Day of the Endangered Lawyer, The Netherlands
Fritt Ord Foundation, Norway
Front Line Defenders
Hyderabad Bar Association, Sindh, Pakistan
Institute for the Rule of Law of the *Union Internationale des Avocats* (UIA-IROL)
International Association of People's Lawyers (IAPL)
International Association of Russian Advocates
International Bar Association's Human Rights Institute (IBAHRI)
International Commission of Jurists (ICJ)
International Observatory for Lawyers at Risk (OIAD)
Italian Democratic Lawyers
Kandiaro Bar Association
Karachi Bar Association

Lawyers for Lawyers (L4L)
Legal Centre Lesbos, Greece
Malir (Karachi) Bar Association, Pakistan
Moro Taluka Bar Association, Pakistan
PEN Norway
Progressive Lawyers' Association (ÇHD), Turkey
Republican Lawyers Association (RAV), Germany
Sindh High Court Bar Association, Hyderabad, Pakistan
Sindh High Court Bar Association, Karachi
The Law Society of England and Wales
World Expression Forum - WEXFO