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Causes of Delayed Disposal of Heinous Criminal Cases in Punjab, Pakistan

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Abstract

The Punjab criminal justice system in Pakistan is grappling with a deep-seated crisis characterized by the severely delayed disposal of serious and heinous criminal cases. This review specifically examines the systemic delays in prosecuting murder (Section 302 Pakistan penal Code), dacoity (Section 395 Pakistan penal Code), and cases involving serious hurt (Sections 337 A to 337 L Pakistan penal Code). This systematic breakdown, which has led to hundreds of thousands of cases going unheard, not only compromises the principle that justice delayed is justice denied but also destroys public trust in state institutions. This review article synthesizes existing literature to systematically identify the multi-faceted causes and broad-ranging implications of these delays. The analysis reveals that the pathology is systemic throughout the entire justice chain. The consequences are catastrophic and cross-cutting for all stakeholders. The findings conclusively indicate that isolated interventions have proven insufficient. Addressing this crisis demands holistic, system-wide reform.

Keywords: *Delayed Justice, Criminal Justice System, Punjab Pakistan, Serious and Heinous Crimes, Case Backlog, Rule of Law, Judicial Reforms, Pre-trial Detention, Access to Justice.*

1. Introduction

The principle that justice delayed is justice denied is not just a legal maxim but it is a general rule of a working democratic society. It states that justice timeliness cannot be separated by the justice quality (Ghani et al., 2023). Once this timeliness is broken, the whole structure of the criminal justice system seems to be invalid. This is not a danger, but a reality in Pakistan, and especially its most populated province, Punjab. The criminal justice system has been plunged into a deep crisis of backlog disposal and this has created a gap between the constitutional pledge of just and swift trial and practical life of its citizens (Ali & Sadia, 2022). The crisis is severe most when dealing with serious and heinous crimes where the stakes of victims, accused, and society are highest. This case of Punjab is not only an administrative failure but is a multi-dimensional issue that is at the core of the rule of law, social cohesion and human rights (Waqar & Iqbal, 2022).

The number of the backlog in Punjab is outrageous providing a quantitative testament to the crisis. The recent statistics as indicated in the analytical reports of the Lahore High Court show that Sessions Courts in Punjab alone had more than 136,000 pending cases as at 2021 and this number has been on an upward trend. This backlog is not a constant figure, but dynamic that keeps on delaying (Malik, 2022). The cases that are not decided increase the workload on the system in a vicious cycle, as the judges and prosecutors are already overworked, and they have to divide their attention among the

ever-expanding docket. The human price of this statistical fact is enormous (Iqbal & Akram, 2024). To the victims of crime, it represents endless wait to get closure and restitution. To the accused, this may translate to years of pre-trial detention in usually deplorable conditions, which in effect punishes innocent people who have not yet been found guilty of any crime. This organizational lethargy cannot be justifiably accepted on the authority of a fair trial under Article 10-A of the Constitution and the principle of the policy of offering inexpensive and quick justice under Article 37(d) of the Constitution of Pakistan (Gul & Ali, 2020).

In order to fully understand the seriousness of this delay, it is important to specify which group of cases was the most affected: "serious and heinous crimes". In Pakistani legal framework, although no specific statutory definition of this term exists, this term is operationally defined based on the seriousness of the crime and the harshness of sentence. These are the offenses that cause much indignation among many people and ones that essentially subvert the social contract (Abbas et al., 2024).

This review pays particular attention to three prevalent categories of such crimes that contribute significantly to the case backlog in Punjab: murder (Section 302 **Pakistan penal Code**), dacoity (Section 395 **Pakistan penal Code**), and the voluntarily causing of serious hurt (Sections 337 A to 337 L **Pakistan penal Code**). Murder, as the most severe crime against a person, sets the upper benchmark for judicial delays in life-or-death matters. Dacoity, or gang robbery, represents a grave threat to public security and economic stability, often involving complex investigations with multiple accused. Cases of serious hurt, including those involving dangerous weapons or acid attacks, are not only highly violent but also leave victims with permanent physical and psychological scars, making expeditious justice a critical component of their recovery and societal reintegration. The protracted disposal of these specific offense types epitomizes the systemic failures explored in this analysis. Key examples include:

- **Murder (Section 302 PPC):** The unlawful premeditated killing of one person by another.
- **Rape and Gang Rape (Section 376 PPC):** As amended by the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 2016, which introduced stricter penalties and procedural reforms.
- **Terrorism-related Offenses:** Prosecuted under the Anti-Terrorism Act (ATA) of 1997, which establishes a parallel legal framework intended for swift justice but often plagued by its own complexities.
- **Kidnapping for Ransom (Section 365-A PPC):** A crime that instills widespread fear and targets personal liberty for financial gain.
- **Child Sexual Abuse:** As defined under contemporary laws like the Zainab Alert, Response and Recovery Act of 2020.
- **Blasphemy (Sections 295-B and 295-C PPC):** Highly sensitive cases that often carry immense societal pressure and security risks, further complicating and delaying judicial proceedings.
- **Dacoity and robbery cases under section 394 and 395 of PPC**
- **Hurt cases (section 337 A to 337 L) the offences affecting human body**

The "heinous" nature of these crimes places a heightened burden on the criminal justice system to perform with both efficiency and integrity (Azeem et al., 2023). The complexity of evidence, the number of witnesses, and the intense public and media scrutiny associated with such cases inherently make them more resource-intensive and prone to procedural delays (Asghar, 2023). When the system fails to dispose of these grave matters in a timely fashion, the message sent to society is one of profound dysfunction and impunity, eroding public trust not just in the judiciary, but in the state's ability to provide basic security and justice.

It is against this backdrop that the purpose of this review article is established. This paper aims to conduct a systematic and comprehensive synthesis of the available scholarly literature, official reports, and legal commentaries to investigate the causes and consequences of delayed disposal specifically concerning serious and heinous crimes in Punjab, Pakistan. This review is purposely multi-faceted. It will explore the systemic bottlenecks to the main pillars of the justice system that include the police, the prosecution and the judiciary and also explore the role of the overriding legal framework. Moreover, it will examine unique socio-political and cultural background of Punjab, which worsens these delays. This review will be able to critically evaluate the available body of evidence in order to get a consolidated view of this complex issue, find some critical gaps in the current literature, and to provide the basis upon which evidence-based policy recommendations can be made in order to lead to attainment of meaningful and holistic reform. The end-product is to be a contribution to a discussion that will go beyond identifying the administrative failures, and to picturing a criminal justice system that might realize the constitutional and moral promises it purports to make.

2. Theoretical Framework

The delayed justice crisis in Punjab is not in a normative vacuum. It is a violation of a key violation of a legal principle with strong historical foundation and strong international and constitutional significance, which is the right to a speedy trial. It is not a formality of the procedure, but rather a foundation of the effective and just criminal justice system that cannot be even conceived without the validity of the state power and the security of the liberty of individuals (Baig et al., 2024). Its theoretical foundations, including both Enlightenment philosophy and contemporary human rights law, furnish the necessary bone structure of comprehending the seriousness of failures in the structure of the Pakistani system.

As regards its intellectual justification, the principle of speedy trial was eloquently defended in the 18th century by the Italian criminologist Cesare Beccaria in his masterpiece, *On Crimes and Punishments* (1764). According to Beccaria, deterrence is the main aim of punishment, and in order to ensure effective deterrence, punishment has to be prompt and inevitable. He had assumed that the psychological relationship between a crime and its punishment is attenuated by time and that the preventive effect of punishment is thus reduced. Moreover, Beccaria pointed out the great human price of time which the accused must pay, the bitter memory of the supposed crime, the fear of the unknown future as long as it remains undecided on the sentence. This pre-trial detention, he argued, is punishment in itself, which is applied without a conviction of guilt a notion which is inconsistent with the presumption of innocence. Beccaria did not envision a

system of fast justice, but a system of efficient and humane justice administration with minimum pre-trial detention and prompt trials to ensure the greatest good and fairness to the society (Beccaria, 2016).

This philosophical necessity has been enshrined in the contemporary international human rights law establishing binding legal duty of states, including Pakistan (Tiwari, 2022). This right is explicitly written in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which Pakistan is also a signatory where in Article 14(3)(c) the right to be tried without undue delay is guaranteed to an accused person. This is to acknowledge that justice postponed is justice denied especially in cases where the freedom, reputation, and livelihood of a person are at risk (Islam et al., 2021). The meaning of the term undue delay as applied by the UN Human Rights Committee is relative, taking into consideration the nature of the case and the actions of the judicial authorities, but is clearly applicable to all phases of the judicial procedure, including investigation to the highest court of appeal (Zeegers, 2016). Other tools are added to this global norm, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which is more urgently concerned about juvenile justice. The delayed nature of the criminal justice system in Pakistan which takes decades to resolve cases is a distinct break of these international obligations, leaving Pakistan in breach of its international law obligations (Ferreira et al., 2024).

It is having a vital significance and with this realization, Pakistan has established this right in its own constitution. The watershed moment came with the introduction of Article 10-A in 2010 under the 18 th Amendment that expressly assured the right to a fair trial and due process to all citizens (Heri, 2022). Although the phrase in the article does not explicitly state the term speedy trial, the Supreme Court of Pakistan has always taken the interpretation of what a fair trial entails, to include the aspect of timeliness. A trial which lasts years cannot be fair because the evidence withers, witnesses are lost or their memories have faded, the accused is subjected to long-lasting psychological and social stigma (Fraser & Henderson, 2022). Such a constitutional right is also supported by the principles of policy in Article 37(d), which guides the state to provide inexpensive and expeditious justice. Thus, the time delays which are characteristic of the system are not the administrative inefficiencies; they are a direct violation of the basic constitutional rights and turn the justice system into the organ of their violation instead of its guarantor (Gillett, 2025).

The combination of these principles boils down to three main concepts that are crucial to the analysis of the situation in Punjab. First, there is Delayed Disposal that implies the undue duration that has passed between the moment when a case is started (by registering a First Information Report) and the moment when it is finally adjudicated, even in the event of appeals (Shany, 2023). This is not only a time loss in years but also a loss of justice itself. Second, such delays essentially undermine the Rule of Law. This principle requires that everyone and even the state is subject to law which is publicly promulgated, equally applied and judgmentally independent (Kapelńska-Pręgoska, 2021).

A culture of justice being postponed regularly gives rise to a culture of impunity, weakening the ability of law to deter crime, and promoting the notion that those who have money or influence can compromise law. At last, Access to Justice is made a mirage (Haddad & Sundstrom, 2023). The real access does not simply mean the theoretical

capability to access a courthouse, but the actual possibility to request and receive a remedy in a timely manner. And where the process has become protracted to the point of bankrupting victims, wearing out witnesses, and destroying the lives of the innocent accused, the formal right to go before the court has become a hollow promise. The culture of delay, endorsed and practiced at the system level in Punjab, is denying the meaningful access to justice and is an ongoing cycle of injustice that undermines even the pillars on which the social order rests (Freeland & Ireland-Piper, 2022).

3. Systemic Causes of Delay

The delayed disposal of serious and heinous criminal cases in Punjab is not attributable to a single point of failure but represents a systemic collapse across the entire justice chain (Amarkhil et al., 2023). From the initial investigation to the final adjudication, each pillar of the criminal justice system is plagued by inefficiencies, resource constraints, and structural flaws that collectively create an insurmountable barrier to timely justice (Zhao et al., 2021).

3.1. Police Investigations: The Foundational constrain

The criminal justice process begins with police and it is here that a great deal of delays is usually incorporated. The extreme resource constraint, inefficient ways of collecting evidence, and political influence on the entire procedure are all three factors that are critical to the investigation stage in Punjab (Politi et al., 2022).

The key weakness is that there is a constraint in terms of resources. Studies indicate that the shortage of investigating officers is acute particularly in all major cities like Lahore, Faisalabad, Rawalpindi, Gujranwala, and Multan with 1 investigating officer being allocated more than 50 cases in active case-load (Sanni-Anibire et al., 2022). This large caseload does not give an opportunity to investigate a certain case in detail. Other aggravating factors are dire lack of equipment; according to a poll, very few police stations have rudimentary evidence-gathering kits or functioning investigation vehicles. This is further aggravated by the absence of training, majority of the investigators are trained through informal apprenticeship program rather than through structured training in present day forensic practices and law (Shabbir, 2022).

There is pathetic evidence collection and this actually weakens a case before trial. The criminal cases are commonly founded on the confessions model versus the scientific facts, and thus, they are weak and can be easily challenged in a court (Sultan & Makhdoom, 2024). These generic deficiencies can include failure to properly manage the crime scene, failure to treat the evidence properly and failure to properly interview the witnesses. These shortcomings tend to necessitate studies or an extended process of cross-examining, which prolongs the period of disposition of cases (Sarwar, 2024). Even though the establishment of the Punjab Forensic Science Agency was a move in the right direction the impact is as minimal as backlogs, inaccessibility to rural police stations and police staff lack of training on how to collect evidence (Akram et al., 2025).

Political interference and corruption also spoil the investigative process. Despite the reforms, police in Punjab remains subject to political pressure particularly in cases that relate to high profile or politically sensitive cases. Such manipulation can be in form of arbitrary assignment of investigating officers, coercion to implicate or exonerate some individuals or intentional procrastination of investigations (Kausar et al., 2023). Rampant

corruption, in which the police have generally been ranked among the most corrupt institutions in Pakistan, adds further delays in terms of activities such as falsification of evidence and bribery, which presents cases that have been founded on a shaky platform and which are bound to undergo a long legal process (Ghufran Ahmed et al., 2022).

3.2. Prosecution Bottlenecks: The Weak Link

After an investigation is finished, the case proceeds to the prosecution where a new group of bottlenecks appears. Punjab prosecution service is faced with huge caseloads, lack of coordination with the law enforcers, and outside influences that affect its performance (Mustafa et al., 2023).

The prosecution has to contend with the overwhelming caseloads and limited resources on daily basis. Urban center prosecutors can handle between 200-300 active cases at a time, well above international norms and making proper case preparation impossible. It gives way to the prioritization of the cases according to the outer pressures instead of the merits of the case. It is also susceptible to the lack of resources, such as the absence of basic office facilities, legal research tools, and technological aids, which mean that prosecutors have to cope with their staggering workloads with little administrative support (Rizvi & Khalid, 2024).

Lack of coordination, with police, results in critical disjunction of the process of justice. The system is not collaborative but sequential with prosecutors joining in when the police investigations have been concluded. Such lack of connection implies that prosecutors are unable to direct investigations to make sure evidence is collected in a way that can be presented in court. Thus, prosecutors find themselves frequently inheriting cases with lethal evidential defects and inquiry into further investigation is requested or the process fails in court both are major contributors to delay (G Ahmed et al., 2022).

The prosecutorial service lacks independence because of external influences in the decisions made by the prosecutors. There is a pressure on the prosecutors by the political elites, influential people in the community and media sensationalism especially when it comes to high profile cases that involve grave crime. These forces may lead to rushed to the pin of the neck prosecutions, deliberate stalling of politically inconvenient cases or convictions based on other criteria other than legal merit, all which directly cause systemic delays (Butt & Bajwa, 2025).

3.3. Judicial Challenges: The Overburdened Adjudicator

The court level where evidence is introduced and the verdicts given is itself typified by massive backlogs, poor infrastructure and ineffective procedures that grossly slow down the case disposition (Imam, 2020).

The lack of judicial capacity and enormous backlog results into an underlying imbalance. The ratio of judges per population in Punjab is appallingly low; there are only one judge per 62,000 in Punjab as compared to one judge per 20,000 people in the international level. It creates an unsustainable pressure on the judiciary system with Sessions Courts alone having more than 136,000 cases pending. This backlog has a self-perpetuation loop by adding cases to the backlog more quickly than the older cases are settled, so even simple cases will take years to close (Umar & Khan, 2022).

Technological constraints of the court infrastructures also hinder efficiency. Most of the courthouses use colonial buildings, which are congested and have poor facilities.

Old record keeping systems result in lost files and tedious systems of accessing the files (Laghari et al., 2023). Although there have been cases where courts have adopted case management systems, there is still uneven adoption, especially in the rural realm. These technological shortcomings were revealed by the COVID-19 pandemic, and a significant number of courts shut down altogether during lockdowns because they could not switch to virtual hearings (Maqbool, 2022).

Perhaps the most important factor of judicial delay is procedural complexities and frequent adjournments. There is the Code of Criminal Procedure, 1898, which sets up formalistic and convoluted rules which favor technical conformity to substantive justice. Adjournments are regularly allowed due to reasons such as unavailability of witnesses and lawyer-scheduling conflict, and incomplete police reports. Every adjournment may postpone a case several weeks or months, serious cases frequently going through dozens of adjournments before conclusion (Saeed et al., 2024).

3.4. Legal Framework: Archaic Laws and Procedural Loopholes

The failings of police, prosecution, and judiciary are operating within a legal system that in turn adds much to the delays via archaic organization, jurisdictional issues, and procedural indefiniteness.

The foundation of the problem is based on the archaic laws. The main governing rule is the Pakistan Penal Code (1860) and Code of Criminal Procedure (1898), although it was offered to the colonial government, and not a modern justice system (Nadeem & Khan, 2017). Their archaic lingo and the complexity of their procedures in themselves presents inherent inefficiencies. The parallel regime set-up of the Anti-Terrorism Act (1997), designed to hasten terrorism cases, has in fact resulted in jurisdictional issues and sufficiently ambiguous definitions that in many instances slows down instead of speeding up cases (Asghar et al., 2023).

The jurisdictional issues between the special and ordinary courts cause serious delays in the processes. There is often litigation on the issue of whether a case is to be tried in an anti-terrorism or ordinary sessions court, and such jurisdictional problems are often difficult to overcome in years before even the trial on the merits commences (Bilal & Sajjad, 2024).

Even bail and evidence rules create new loopholes and bring about more uncertainties. The bail clauses in Pakistan are not consistently applied, and as a result, some are imprisoned before trial, and others released. The Qanun-e-Shahadat Order (1984), the law of evidence, is a contentious system of integration of common law and Islamic law, which often produces conflicting understandings, which result in interlocutory appeals that delay proceedings. The lack of a strong witness protection system and use of plea bargaining on serious cases are other structural failures that lead to the systematic culture of delay (Waqar & Iqbal, 2022).

All of these interdependent failures in the police, prosecution, judiciary, and legal system lead to an all-but-impossible barrier of justice delivered in a timely manner. To solve this crisis we need a comprehensive overhaul, which would concomitantly work on all these systemic failures and not single interventions, which have failed time and again (Bilal & Sajjad, 2024).

4. Multi-faceted Implications

The immense delays in the criminal justice system of Punjab lead to disastrous effects that go way beyond statistical backlogs. The victims, the accused, witnesses, and the society as a whole have their own unique and yet interrelated burdens, forming a general erosion of justice which weakens the very principles of the rule of law.

4.1. Victims and Their Families: The Erosion of Justice

Delays in justice to victims of serious and heinous crimes, and their families, are not a passive time of waiting but a continuation of their traumatic experience, resulting in deeply traumatic psychological, economic, and social damages (Cheema & Khan, 2022).

Prolonged Legal action contributes to Psychological and Emotional Trauma in an acute manner. The long period of uncertainty does not allow victims to experience closure and they end up being trapped in a psychological limbo where they have to repeat their trauma over years or even decades due to court appearances and testifying (Ahmed, 2021). This is what is referred to as secondary victimization or re-traumatization and is extremely sharp when the crime incident is violent like rape and assault. Every court session, and every recounting of the traumatic event, has the potential to instigate traumatizing recollection, the cumulative psychological effect of the years can be disabling to many victims (A. A. Rana et al., 2022).

Further devastating effects are Economic Hardship and Loss of Trust. The economic cost of continued litigation such as lost time standing in court, transport expenses, and litigation expenses can be devastating. In the case of victims with physical injuries, lack of access to court-ordered compensation on a timely basis translates to missing out on medical services necessary to them, forcing the family into poverty. This process is long-term and expensive and, in the end, destroys the confidence of those victims in the judicial system. When the state continually fails to bring justice on time, victims might come to the conclusion that it is pointless to engage in the formal process, which will result in the underreporting of crimes and a greater crisis of legitimacy of the whole justice system (Khaliq & Sultan, 2022).

Impunity and Re-victimization are normalized. The weak victims such as women, children and the marginalized group are most likely to be re-victimized by the system that is supposed to defend them. The victims of sexual abuse in Punjab can be subjected to insensitive interrogations repeatedly and a process that takes a long time to add to their original trauma (R. Rana et al., 2022). In addition, delays give confidence to offenders who might be on bail years before their guilt is proven, and they will be either intimidating their victims or perpetrating additional crimes. This impunity does not only pose a threat to the victims, but also highly negates the deterrent impact of criminal punishment.

4.2. Accused Individuals: Due Process Concerns

Although in the context of the public discourse, the right of the victims is frequently discussed, delayed justice at the same time infringes upon the basic rights of accused persons, undermining the primary principle of innocence until proved guilty.

One of the worst forms of injustice is Prolonged Pre-trial Detention. The under-trial prisoners are about 70 percent of the total population of prisoners in Punjab with several of the prisoners already serving longer periods in detention than their maximum sentences on their alleged offenses (Shamim, 2022). The detention conditions observed in these congested centers, which human rights groups term as cruel and inhuman, not only severely undermine the fundamental human dignity, but also negatively affect the accused to defend himself effectively, further delaying the process of resolving the case (Nasir, 2024).

Influence on the Fair Trial Rights and Legal Representation is extensive. Cases take years and the evidence is degraded, witnesses are lost or lose important details and memories are lost. This is the decay of evidence that basically undermines the right of the accused to have a proper defense. Moreover, and although the affording accused persons can have counsel on hand ad hoc, poor accused persons with state-appointed or pro bono representation are likely to experience attorney churn, which leads to excessive familiarization of the lawyer with the case, creating inefficiency and further latency (Mustafa et al., 2023).

The risk of Wrongful Convictions is augmented with time. Criminal justice faces pressure to adjudicate old cases, and in the process of doing so, there exists a lack of evidence and trustworthiness on the side of the witnesses, which all creates an environment where a false judgment can occur (Bharadwaj & Rao, 2021). Having no systematic procedure to detect and remedy incorrect convictions, Pakistan has no systemic procedure to address procedural correctness over factual innocence and uses the same lag in time as did the initial trial. The human cost of such failures in the system can be seen in cases such as that of Younis Masih who served more than seven years on death row because of blasphemy, before he was acquitted (Fani & Naqvi, 2023).

4.3. Witnesses: Deterrents to Cooperation

Witnesses are the heavyweight of criminal prosecutions, but the widespread backlog of delay acts as a countervailing pressure to them, in its long-term effect.

Direct effects of protracted proceedings are Witness Intimidation and Unwillingness to Testify. The long time horizon gives enough time to suspected individuals or their supporters to threaten and bully witnesses. Without proper witness protection programs, most witnesses will eventually be pressured out, either by recanting or simply disappearing (Thakur et al., 2025). The individual cost of continued involvement in the form of lost income, transportation costs, and the psychological impact of having to relive traumatic events again and again, is in the aggregate far more than any sense of civic responsibility, especially to bystander witnesses (Mehmood, 2024).

Difficulties with Maintaining Accurate Testimony are unavoidable due to fallibility of a human memory. The recollections of witnesses are bound to become less vivid and accurate over the years of delay. These standard memory restrictions are played upon in cross-examination in an adversarial system such as the one in Pakistan, and small

discrepancies are fed as evidence of falsehood. This issue is especially severe in cases of child witnesses where the cognitive and linguistic maturation of the witness over a long period of time can considerably change the way they remember and recount an incident, and invalidate otherwise plausible testimony (Ullah et al., 2024).

4.4. Society: Undermining the Rule of Law

The sum that all these delays add to the society is perhaps the most detrimental effect, which undermines the social contract to undermine democratic governance. The most corrosive effect is, perhaps, Erosion of Public Trust in state institutions. It loses faith in the whole system of justice when grave crimes go unpunished over a long period of time. According to survey results conducted in Punjab, only small percentage of citizens have confidence in courts which provide fair and effective decisions (Batoool et al., 2024). Such distrust is especially common among marginalized groups who view the system as preferential to the strong and may be extended outward to other institutions of the state undermining democratic legitimacy on the whole (Jamil, 2021).

Perceptions of Insecurity and Impunity become rampant. Unresolved cases of murders, terrorism or sexual violence with high profile send a direct message that criminals can get away with it, which may lead to the encouragement of a crime. Such a perception changes the behavior of people, believing that the state is not able to secure them; citizens can use self-help options such as limiting movements, armed themselves, or isolating themselves against social and economic impacts (Ahmed et al., 2024).

The risk of Vigilante Justice occurs due to failure of formal justice systems. Inflamed by structural delays, society can resort to other dispute resolution methods, including tribal jirgas or extremes, mob violence. These extra-legal strategies though occasionally fast, have no procedural protections, and frequently they serve to secure traditional sources of power, and discriminate against women and minorities (Quarterly, 2024). The appalling rate of mob killings of those suspected of blasphemies in Punjab is a sadly familiar expression of this dynamics, in which the ineffectiveness of the formal system and the inefficiency, seen to have been in it, contribute to deadly informal justice (Rahim et al., 2022).

The ultimate cost in society is undermining of Rule of Law and Democratic Governance. The rule of law does not only mean the law in paper but the law in action. Failure by the justice system to dispose serious cases within a reasonable time period will leave a major gap between legal aspiration and impact that will undermine the legitimacy of the legal system and the state itself (Faisal & Ashrad, 2023). Such a legitimacy crisis can contribute to social polarization and democratic backsliding by making citizens vulnerable to institutional processes of resolving conflicts since the electorate will have no belief on neutral institutional processes. In a multicultural community such as the Punjab, such failures endanger the social cohesiveness needed to govern a community in a stable manner (Rasheed & Fatima, 2024).

5. The Punjab-Specific Context

Although the systemic shortcomings of the criminal justice system in Punjab reflect the national issues, the socio-political and cultural peculiarities of the region present a different context in which the delays are not tolerated but even tend to be promoted. This

particular context is important to understand to come up with effective and localized reform strategies.

The Punjab is a state where socio-political patronage and interference play a major role in the administration of justice. Being the largest and most influential province in the country, the justice system of Punjab functions in a complex of political networks, dynastic politics, and opposing interest groups. This climate predisposes the system especially to instrumentalization whereby the political elite often seek to exploit the courts to influence the process of adjudication, scheduling of cases and allocation of resources to their own advantage (Nabi, 2024). Although the provincial government and the judiciary are constitutionally separate, it is a tense relationship that is shown in the allocation of resources, administrative veto as well as direct intercession of politically sensitive cases. These dynamics give rise to a situation whereby the rate and the trajectory of justice can be intentionally influenced, whereby systemic slowness is not merely a mere result of inefficiency, but in some cases, a goal (Feyyaz & Husnain Bari, 2024a).

The fact that culture also complicates timely formal justice seeking makes this even more complicated. The honor (izzat) is a potent social currency, especially when it comes to reporting and adjudicating offences that are seen to have an impact on family status like sexual violence or so-called moral offences. This results in many cases of underreporting, intimidation of victims to drop charges or development of parallel justice systems (Ali, 2025). There are still informal systems of justice, like jirgas (tribal assemblies) and panchayats (village councils), that run parallel to official courts, and in many cases issue decisions that are fast but often violate the statutory law and human rights norms, especially in the rights of women. Also on matters of religious sensitiveness, e.g. blasphemy, the formal system is under enormous pressure, and the judges, prosecutors and police are at times vulnerable to external influence and intimidation, resulting in procedural paralysis and periods of latency (Mehmood et al., 2024).

The inequality of justice in Punjab alone is a highly uneven region due to regional differences. The province is not homogenous and different regions have completely different experiences of justice. Urban areas such as Lahore have a relatively better judicial infrastructure and resources but is struggling with massive caseloads. However, Southern Punjab, which includes such districts as Multan and Bahawalpur, has deeper problems (Feyyaz & Husnain Bari, 2024b). This region has lower economic development, more feudal systems, less-developed infrastructure, and poorly-resourced courts featuring severe staffing gaps and extensive jurisdiction that makes physical access to the law difficult in practice. These inequalities are further enhanced by the urban-rural dichotomy that results in the formation of a multi-level system where the timeliness and quality of justice is largely contingent on the geographical location of a citizen, thus, the urban-rural dichotomy increases cycle of disadvantage and institutional neglect (Sadia & Sabreen, 2024).

6. Reform Efforts and Challenges

Realizing the depth of crisis of delayed justice, multiple reform movements have been initiated across the years aiming at reforming the criminal justice system of Punjab. These initiatives, of judicial, legislative, and executive origins, have sought to leverage various points of pressure in the system, but have been limited in overall success by the structural and institutional challenges that remain in place (Azhar et al., 2025).

The major initiatives have showed a clear grasp of the issues, although it may have lacked execution. Another important top-down judiciary initiative was the National Judicial Policy (NJP), which was first published in 2009, and updated in 2012, aiming at addressing case backlogs. It set specific timelines within which cases should be disposed, capped adjournments, and encouraged other forms of dispute resolution especially in expediting criminal cases in cases of under-trial detainees (Abbas, 2021).

The more recent and easy-to-see innovation was the opening of Model Courts in 2019 by the Lahore High Court. These specialty courts were intended to serve the function of a pilot project, showing that large efficiency improvements could be achieved by managing cases stringently, limiting the number of adjournments, and conducting continuous trials. The early outcomes were encouraging and a few model courts had cleared thousands of pending kill and narcotics trials and shortened the average length of trial to months. Along with these judicial changes, a vigorous drive toward the adoption of technology has been made, such as the introduction of Case Flow Management Systems (CFMS) and video conferencing equipment. These technologies should facilitate the administrative procedures, decrease logistical delays in detainees production, and increase the transparency (Hossain, 2021).

Regardless of such good intentions, the effects of this have been insufficient, and it shows a disconnect between policy formulation and reality on the ground. One of the main limitations has been the chronic shortage of resources. Such activities as model courts and digital systems are long term investments in infrastructure, training, and technical maintenance, which has been uneven (Akram et al., 2025). The model courts worked only because of the preferential resource and judicial attention allocation, and this model cannot be extended to the whole province without injecting significant capital and human resources into it. More so, an institutional opposition has been deeply rooted and thus has thwarted numerous reforms. Honest judges, lawyers, and court employees who are used to conventional ways tend to not comply or rather be passive towards new procedures that alter the working patterns and authority. This is a barrier to change and is an extremely powerful cultural inertia. Lastly, one of the most critical deficits of the various theaters of the justice system is the lack of coordination, which has destroyed the systemic improvement (Bilal & Sajjad, 2024). Any efforts to reform the judiciary will in isolation not help when police investigations are still unsatisfactory and the prosecution service is overwhelmed. A bottleneck eliminated within the courts can just be transferred to the other aspect of the system. Even the most encouraging of the reforms will have trouble in bringing about a lasting transformational change in the dispensation of justice without holistic, system wide coordination that would deal with police, prosecution and judiciary in tandem.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

The comprehensive examination of the delayed justice in Punjab is able to draw one single and strong conclusion: it is not a set of individual inefficiencies but a systemic disease. The endemic slowness with which serious and heinous crimes are disposed of, is the result of a vicious circle of failure that extends through the whole chain of justice. Weak cases as a result of inefficient police investigation cause prosecutorial bottlenecks and lengthy court processes; judicial backlog, in its turn, gives rise to a culture of delay in

which investigators and witnesses are discouraged. It is these interrelated dysfunctions such that any reforms that focus on one institution alone are bound to achieve little. The system does not need a tune-up, but a basic reorganization on the basis of integration, investment and a new dedication to the rule of law.

It is critical to have a multi-pronged approach to the problem so as to break this cycle. Such transformative change, as follows, can provide recommendations:

To start with, the central one is reformed justice. Silos operation between the police, prosecution and judiciary presently should be substituted with a model of collaboration. This necessitates the creation of formal and informal structures of ongoing coordination including integrated case management systems across all the three pillars and initial prosecutor guidance in significant investigations. Through the inculcation of a sense of a justice system as opposed to a bunch of mini fiefdoms, evidence gathering may be programmed to match legal requirements at the very beginning thus eliminating procedural errors and eliminating the necessity of adjournment after adjournment. Such view is systemic in nature since it recognizes that efficiency will be lost in one area whilst a bottleneck exists in another area.

Second, there is higher level of judicial capacity and infrastructure, which are non-negotiable conditions to be employed. The judge-to-population ratio is staggering and the state of court facilities, most especially in rural and Southern Punjab, is deplorable, but is not an incidental cause of delay. This should be a huge, long-term investment, and should be dedicated to appointing a full generation of new judges, refurbishing courtrooms, and fully computerizing court records. The positive outcomes of the model courts indicate what can be achieved with the concentrated resources and effective case management; the only question is how to extend the principles to the whole province, which is impossible without equal devotion to money and human resources.

Third, simplification of legal processes and enhancement of witness protection are both important legal and procedural changes. The archaic Code of Criminal Procedure, 1898, with its elaborate and formalistic stipulations, needs to be updated in order to remove the unnecessary procedure and prevent the culture of endless adjournments. At the same time, an effective and strong witness protection program is needed to guarantee the integrity of evidence. The sheer coercion of witnesses and their further unwillingness to testify is a direct consequence of crumbling the case. The protection and assistance of witnesses is not a side-dish feature of the working adversarial system but a major element, without which the pursuit of the truth could not be possible.

Lastly, and possibly the most important, these technical and procedural reforms will not succeed in the absence of political determination to guarantee institutional independence. The ubiquitous role of political favours and outside influence of police investigations, prosecutors and even the judicial proceedings infect the whole process. The executive should show a serious interest in ensuring that the justice system is not compromised by political interests, the constitutional doctrine of judicial independence is maintained, and that the resources are offered without conditions. Sustainable reform is not feasible in a place where the tools of justice are perceived to be political combat weapons.

To conclude, delayed justice in Punjab is an enormous challenge, which cannot be overcome, but not the same. It takes a clear break with fragmented interventions and a single approach on a system-wide basis to move ahead. The architectural pillars of delay can be broken down by incorporating the pillars of justice, making a decisive investment in capacity building, streamlining cumbersome processes, and strengthening institutional autonomy in Punjab. The idea is not simply quicker justice, but a system that regains confidence of the people and works to the advantage of the rule of law to any citizen.

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