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E-Governance in Pakistan: Why Every Relaunch Fails, and What Would Actually Work

Pakistan ranks 136th out of 193 countries on the UN's E-Government Development Index, second-last in South Asia ahead of only Afghanistan, and the flagship Citizen's Portal has spent months at a time simply not working — not because the country lacks digital talent, but because every relaunch tries to fix an app instead of the fragmented institutions behind it.

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Introduction

For two months in 2025, Pakistan's Citizen's Portal — the flagship app through which citizens are supposed to lodge complaints directly with government departments — simply did not work. Users opened it to a "system under necessary maintenance" message that never resolved; the helpline confirmed the outage but offered no timeline. It was not the app's first relaunch and would not be its last. The pattern is now familiar enough to be a genre of its own in Pakistani digital governance: a portal launches with a press conference, works reasonably well for a period, degrades, and is eventually relaunched — sometimes under a new name, sometimes under the same one — with the underlying causes of the previous failure left largely untouched.

The scorecard behind these individual failures is stark. Pakistan ranks 136th out of 193 UN member states on the E-Government Development Index, and second-last within South Asia — ahead of only Afghanistan, and behind India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, and Nepal. This is not for lack of trying: the country has run e-government initiatives since its first electronic government directorate was established in 2002, and the current roster of citizen-facing projects — the Citizen's Portal, a National Jobs Portal, One Patient One ID, the Pak-Hajj App, Beep, the City Islamabad App, and the Digital Economy Enhancement Project — reads like a reasonably ambitious digital-government agenda on paper.

What connects a two-decade-old track record of launches to a persistently poor global ranking is not a shortage of apps, and it is almost certainly not a shortage of technical talent — a country producing hundreds of thousands of IT graduates a year, some of whom build these very portals as contractors, is not short of people who know how to write reliable software. What is missing sits one layer beneath the interface: the institutional plumbing — shared citizen identity, cross-department data-sharing agreements, accountable ownership, and sustained operating budgets — that determines whether any given app survives contact with the bureaucracy it is meant to serve.

> ***"Pakistan doesn't have a shortage of government apps. It has a shortage of institutions willing to be accountable for what happens after the launch event ends."***

Why the Relaunch Cycle Keeps Repeating

Institutionally, responsibility for e-governance in Pakistan is split three ways almost by design: the Ministry of Information Technology and Telecommunications sets policy, the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority

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regulates the networks everything runs on, and the National Information Technology Board actually builds and operates most G2C platforms. None of the three owns citizen outcomes end to end, and none is structurally incentivised to keep an already-launched portal running well once the ribbon-cutting coverage has faded — a PIDE research brief on the Citizen's Portal specifically cites bureaucratic resistance, weak infrastructure, and unreliable data as the recurring, unresolved causes behind its repeated failures.

User reviews of the Citizen's Portal app tell a consistent, unglamorous story: generic "something went wrong" login errors that make it impossible even to register a complaint, and a resolution process that one frustrated user described as complaints simply being forwarded to the department being complained about, which then closes the case on its own say-so. These are not exotic engineering problems. They are the kind of authentication, error-handling, and workflow-design issues any reasonably competent Pakistani software house fixes routinely for private clients — which only reinforces that the blocker is institutional will and sustained budget, not available skill.

The proliferation of separate apps compounds the problem rather than solving it. A citizen who wants to lodge a complaint, check a hospital record, apply for a job, and book Hajj travel today needs four different logins across four different government apps, each maintained by a different team, none of them sharing a common citizen identity layer the way a single National ID number conceptually could. Every new portal launched without that shared foundation is one more system competing for the same scarce maintenance budget and bureaucratic attention that the last one never quite got either.

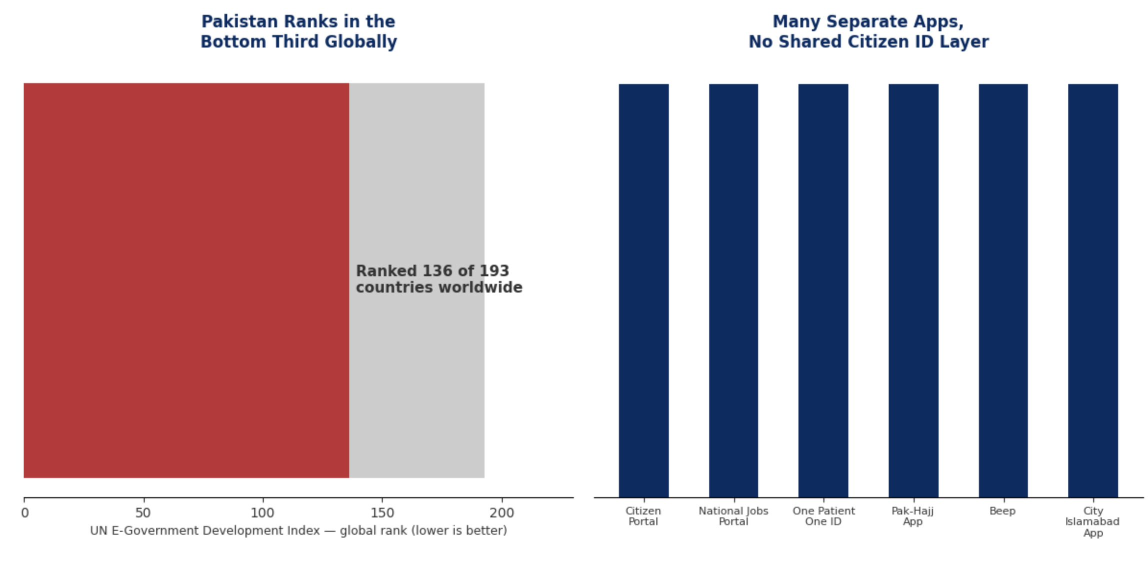

Figure 1: Pakistan sits in the bottom third of the UN's global e-government rankings (left), while its citizen-facing digital projects remain scattered across separate, unlinked apps (right). Sources: UN E-Government Survey via PIDE Knowledge Brief 2026:139; National Information Technology Board (2025).

Key Findings & Impact

The costs of this cycle are not merely reputational. PIDE's research on the Citizen's Portal found that, despite its problems, the platform has genuinely contributed to improved transparency and accountability where it functions, correlating with movement on Pakistan's Corruption Perceptions Index ranking — evidence that the underlying idea works when the system is actually running. Every outage or relaunch therefore represents lost, not merely delayed, governance value: complaints that go unfiled, corruption that goes unflagged, and public trust in digital government that resets a little further backward each time a portal goes dark without explanation.

Countries that have meaningfully improved their e-government standing did not do it primarily through better apps. Singapore, South Korea, and Denmark are cited repeatedly in the comparative literature not for superior interface design but for reducing bureaucratic discretion over digital processes, standardising a single citizen identity across services, and holding one accountable institution responsible for outcomes rather than distributing that responsibility across ministries with competing incentives. Pakistan's own PIDE research explicitly flags the absence of clear KPIs and action plans tied to its digital-transformation policies as a central reason implementation and evaluation remain so difficult — there is no shortage of stated commitment, only of the machinery to measure whether that commitment produced anything.

Local governance adds a further, often-overlooked layer to the failure pattern. Article 140-A of the Constitution mandates devolving political, administrative, and financial authority to local governments, where many of the services citizens actually interact with daily — birth certificates, domicile records, municipal complaints — properly sit. That devolution remains largely unrealised, and local elections are irregularly held, which means even a well-built national portal is often trying to route citizen requests into local institutions that lack the authority, budget, or digital readiness to resolve them promptly. The app is rarely the actual bottleneck.

What's Next?

A different approach would start by fixing ownership before touching a single line of code. That means naming one accountable institution per citizen-facing platform, with a multi-year operating budget that survives the news cycle rather than a one-time development grant that dries up once the launch coverage ends, and binding, publicly tracked KPIs — uptime, complaint-resolution time, resolution quality — reported the way PIDE and independent researchers already do informally when they audit these portals after the fact. None of this requires new technology. It requires the state to treat "sustaining what it built" as seriously as it treats "announcing what it built."

Second, a shared citizen-identity layer — even a minimal one built around the existing CNIC — should be a precondition for any new G2C app, not an afterthought bolted on later; every additional portal launched without it adds fragmentation rather than reach. Third, genuine devolution under Article 140-A would let digital tools plug into local institutions that actually have the authority to close the loop on a complaint, rather than routing citizen frustration into a system designed to forward it and little else. Pakistan's engineers can build another portal in months. What the country has not yet built, after two decades of trying, is the institutional discipline to keep one running — and until that changes, the next relaunch will fail for the same reasons as the last one.

About the Author
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