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5G Arrived — Now Can the Rest of the Country Get Reliable 4G First?

Pakistan raised $507 million auctioning 5G spectrum in March 2026, and the first cities lit up with next-generation service within weeks. Somewhere in rural Balochistan, a student was still waiting for a 4G signal strong enough to load a video call.

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Introduction

On 10 March 2026, Pakistan's IT Minister Shaza Fatima stood in an Islamabad auditorium and called it "maybe one of the most important days in the history of Pakistan." Three telecom operators — Jazz, Zong, and Ufone — had just committed $507 million in a spectrum auction to acquire 480 MHz of next-generation mobile frequencies, nearly tripling Pakistan's total allocated spectrum from 274 MHz to over 750 MHz. Within days, 5G pilot services were live across 180 Jazz sites in Islamabad, all four provincial capitals, Rawalpindi, Multan, and Faisalabad. The country had, after years of false starts, spectrum pricing disputes, legal challenges, and economic headwinds, finally joined the 5G era.

It was a genuine milestone and deserved to be celebrated as one. But even as the launch ceremonies were underway in the capital, a harder and less photogenic question was hanging in the air: for the majority of Pakistanis who have never experienced consistent, reliable 4G — who still live with rural mobile speeds of 5 to 10 Mbps on a good day, dead zones across large swaths of Balochistan and the former FATA regions, and 4G signals that drop indoors with frustrating regularity — what does a 5G launch mean in practice? And when, exactly, does the national connectivity story include them?

> ***"Pakistan has gone from 274 MHz of spectrum to 750 MHz in a single auction. What it has not yet done is connect the half of its population that the 4G era left behind — and 5G cannot fix a gap that fibre and towers never filled."***

The 5G Auction: What Actually Happened

The March 2026 auction was, by almost any measure, a success for Pakistan's telecoms sector. Six frequency bands were offered across 597 MHz of spectrum. Zong secured 110 MHz, Ufone 180 MHz, and Jazz 190 MHz, with the 2,600 MHz band — a workhorse frequency for 5G mid-band deployments — attracting the most competitive bidding. The PTA set affordable reserve prices and structured the auction so that bidding in the 2.6 GHz and 3.5 GHz bands was mandatory for all qualified participants, ensuring the most strategically important spectrum did not go uncontested. The government's policy directive, issued in January 2026, requires operators to deploy 1,000 new sites per year for nine consecutive years, including 200 sites annually specifically to address coverage gaps.

The rollout plan runs to 2035, targeting average speeds of 50 to 100 Mbps, with an initial goal of 50 Mbps and a stated ambition of 100 Mbps by 2030.

The Phase 1 commercial launch, expected by June–July 2026, covers Islamabad, Karachi, Lahore, Peshawar, and Quetta — the federal capital and all four provincial capitals. Phase 2, planned for 2027, extends 5G to secondary cities including Multan, Faisalabad, Sialkot, and Rawalpindi. Pakistan ranked fifth for download speed and sixth for Excellent Consistent Quality in Opensignal's Global Network Excellence Index for Q4 2025 — last in South Asia on the quality measure. The auction will not instantly correct those rankings. But it does provide the spectrum capacity, the policy mandate, and the financial commitment that makes meaningful improvement possible. The question is not whether 5G will eventually reach Pakistan's cities. It is whether the investment commitments that come with it will reach the places 4G never reliably did.

The 4G Problem That 5G Cannot Solve

Here is the uncomfortable arithmetic behind the celebration. Pakistan's national mobile broadband average download speed sits at 22 Mbps — and that is the national figure, weighted heavily toward urban users. In rural areas, where 4G coverage exists at all, speeds routinely fall to 5 to 10 Mbps with variable reliability. Jazz, the operator with the widest 4G footprint, scored 93.5 percent on 4G Availability in Opensignal's February 2025 report — meaning Jazz users on 4G devices were without a 4G signal 6.5 percent of the time they were using their phones. Across the sector, Zong's Consistent Quality score — the measure of whether a network actually meets minimum requirements for demanding applications like video calls and streaming — was 27.8 percent. Less than three in ten moments of mobile use met the quality bar. Large swaths of Balochistan, particularly in Makran and Chaghai districts, have limited or no 4G coverage at all. The former FATA regions are still predominantly served by the Special Communications Organisation because commercial operators have found them economically unviable. These are not marginal populations: Balochistan alone spans 44 percent of Pakistan's land area.

The structural reason these gaps persist is fibre. As of early 2026, only approximately 18 percent of Pakistan's mobile sites are connected to fibre backhaul — compared to a 40 percent international benchmark, and against a Ministry of IT target of 80 percent by 2029. Without fibre feeding the towers, additional spectrum capacity risks delivering theoretical headline speeds rather than real-world quality improvements. A 5G tower on a microwave backhaul link in a semi-rural district will not outperform a well-fibre-connected 4G tower in the same location. The IT Minister herself acknowledged at the launch ceremony that the spectrum auction would improve 4G quality as well as introduce 5G — which is true, because more spectrum reduces congestion on shared bands. But spectrum alone cannot substitute for the fibre densification, tower upgrades, and power solutions that rural and peri-urban coverage ultimately requires.

The Road from Seven Cities to 241 Million People

The government's 2026–2035 rollout plan — 3,000 new network sites annually, rising average speeds, the 80 percent fibre target — is, on paper, the most credible long-term connectivity strategy Pakistan has ever committed to. The Universal Service Fund has demonstrated, through its Rs 13 billion rural broadband and optical fibre projects covering seven districts and 5.5 million rural Pakistanis, that it can translate budget allocations into physical infrastructure. Starlink's regulatory approval in 2025 provides a last-mile option for areas where terrestrial networks will never be cost-effective. And the mandatory 200 coverage-gap sites per year embedded in the 5G licence conditions is a meaningful, enforceable commitment — if the PTA holds operators to it.

Whether those commitments translate into the experience of a farmer in Khuzdar District or a student in the Makran coast will depend on execution quality, regulatory enforcement, and a willingness to treat rural connectivity as an economic necessity rather than a charitable afterthought. The 5G launch was a genuine

achievement, and Pakistan's telecoms sector deserves credit for getting there. But the more consequential test is still ahead: whether a country that spent years struggling to deliver reliable 4G to its own territory can, over the next decade, use the investment momentum of a 5G era to finally connect the half of itself that was left waiting. The spectrum has been auctioned. The sites need to be built. The fibre needs to go in the ground. And the coverage maps need to change — not just in Islamabad, but in Dera Ismail Khan, Turbat, and Chitral too.

About the Author

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