



EDITORIAL

The Ethical Vacuum at the Heart of Pakistan's AI Adoption

Pakistan's National AI Policy promises a million trained AI professionals and fifty thousand civic AI projects by 2030 — but the country still has no passed data protection law, no AI-specific legislation, and a draft governance framework that exempts government bodies from the rules it sets for everyone else.

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Introduction

Pakistan's Federal Cabinet approved the country's first National AI Policy in July 2025, formally launched alongside the Islamabad Artificial Intelligence Declaration in February 2026. It is, on paper, genuinely ambitious: a million trained AI professionals by 2030, fifty thousand civic AI projects, a thousand locally developed AI solutions, new innovation and venture funds, AI Centres of Excellence in major cities, and an AI Council chaired by the IT Minister to oversee all of it. Government agencies are already piloting AI-assisted service delivery, and cities across the country are expanding Safe City camera networks with facial recognition and automated number-plate recognition capabilities, many of them supplied through bilateral agreements with Chinese vendors including Huawei.

What Pakistan does not have, as of this writing, is a passed data protection law of any kind. The Personal Data Protection Bill has been in draft form for years, most recently updated in 2023, and remains stuck in the legislative process. A separate Regulation of Artificial Intelligence Act was introduced in the Senate in 2024 and has gone nowhere since. The Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, Pakistan's only substantially enforced digital-era statute, was written for cybercrime and offers essentially no proactive protection for how personal data is collected, processed, or used by an algorithm. Pakistan is racing to adopt AI at national scale while operating with the legal equivalent of no seatbelt law on a newly built high-speed motorway.

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Where the Vacuum Actually Sits

The Pakistan Digital Authority, established in 2024, released a draft Data Governance Policy for public consultation in June 2026 — the government's first serious attempt to regulate how federal bodies collect, process, and share data. It requires government AI systems to be audited, which sounds like real oversight until you notice the policy sets no clear standards against which those audits would actually be judged. It mentions Internet of Things devices, a category broad enough to include the CCTV and Safe City networks now expanding into facial recognition and automated number-plate recognition, but says almost nothing about how the data those cameras collect should be governed once they start doing more than watching traffic.



The Personal Data Protection Bill has the same structural weakness in a more consequential place: it exempts government bodies from its own compliance requirements. The single institution most actively deploying AI-driven surveillance, predictive analytics, and automated decision-making across the country is also the one the bill declines to bind. Compare that to the European Union's AI Act, which flatly bans social scoring, emotion recognition in workplaces and schools, and predictive criminal profiling, and tightly restricts biometric categorisation and mass facial-recognition scraping regardless of who is doing the deploying. Pakistan's draft framework, by contrast, leaves nearly all of those specific harms — the ones every serious AI governance regime treats as foreseeable — entirely unaddressed.

Where the Silence Gets Dangerous

Civil society groups have been flagging this specific risk for years, not months. The Digital Rights Foundation and the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan raised concerns as early as 2021 about facial recognition being used to identify and track people at political rallies, university campuses, and religious gatherings, with little to no transparency about how that footage is stored, matched, or shared. Legal scholars reviewing the current framework note that Pakistan's foundational statutes — the Penal Code, the Evidence Act, criminal procedure law — were never written with autonomous decision-making, algorithmic discrimination, or AI-generated evidence in mind, and have not yet been meaningfully amended to account for any of it. A regulatory gap this wide does not stay theoretical for long: it becomes the quiet path by which a public-safety tool drifts into a political-surveillance one, because nothing in the law currently stops that drift or even requires anyone to notice it happening.

The human cost of the current data-protection gap is not hypothetical either. In one documented case, a Pakistani patient's sensitive health information was disseminated without authorisation and used to identify him publicly; the resulting harassment included journalists staking out his home, with several mainstream outlets abandoning basic verification and privacy norms in pursuit of the story. That case involved no AI system at all — it was a plain data leak met with an ordinary media pile-on — and Pakistan's current legal framework still could not adequately protect him. Layering large-scale automated decision-making, biometric matching, and predictive analytics onto that same weak foundation does not close the gap. It multiplies the number of ways a similar failure can happen, and raises the stakes each time it does.

What's Next?

None of this requires Pakistan to invent new regulatory philosophy from scratch — it requires finishing what other jurisdictions have already modelled. The EU's risk-based approach, pairing an AI Act with GDPR-grade data rights and clear prohibitions on the highest-harm use cases, gives Pakistani legislators a tested template rather than a blank page. The immediate, achievable steps are specific: pass the Personal Data Protection Bill without the government exemption that currently guts its most important application, move the stalled Regulation of Artificial Intelligence Act out of Senate limbo, and require the Data Governance Policy's promised audits to be measured against publicly published standards rather than left to each agency's discretion.

Pakistan's National AI Policy is not the problem — a country with this much genuine technical talent and this real a stake in the AI economy has every reason to move fast on adoption. The problem is moving fast on adoption while moving nowhere on the law that is supposed to constrain it, and hoping the gap closes itself before it matters. It won't. Every month the Personal Data Protection Bill sits in draft and the AI Regulation Act sits in Senate limbo is another month in which facial recognition, predictive policing, and automated decision-making expand into Pakistani public life with no enforceable floor beneath them — and the country will not find out how costly that vacuum was until it produces a harm large enough that no policy launch can talk over it.

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