



Human Rights
Commission of
Pakistan

I A Rehman Research Grant Series

TRUTH COMES AT A PRICE

*Censorship and the battle for an
independent media*

Razeshta Sethna

Truth Comes at a Price

Censorship and the battle for an independent media



Human Rights Commission of Pakistan

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Human Rights Commission of Pakistan

Aiwan-e-Jamhooir

107 Tipu Block, New Garden Town

Lahore 54600

T: +92 42 3583 8341, 3586 4994, 3586 9969

F: +92 42 3588 3582

E: hrcp@hrcp-web.org

www.hrcp-web.org

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Introduction: Why the power of the media matters in Pakistan

In 2021, Reporters Without Borders placed Pakistan 145th among 180 countries in its 2021 World Press Freedom Index. In March 2021, the International Federation of Journalists listed five countries—including Pakistan—as the second-most dangerous for the media, with 138 journalists killed since 1990.¹ Common methods used to attack press freedom and influence news dissemination include intimidatory tactics ranging from physical beatings to verbal abuse, draconian colonial-era laws and counterterrorism legislation, regulatory and financial pressure, and public denunciations of reputed journalists.

This report, which was produced as part of the I. A. Rehman Research Grant Series, aims to document the dangerous and stifling media environment in Pakistan after the 2018 election that has compelled journalists and editors to work at great personal risk. It explores the vulnerabilities of the media that limit its ability to play the role of a watchdog, to foster democratic values and foreground pluralistic voices as a way to inform citizens of critical debates shaping society. The report relies on responses from over 30 interviewees—journalists, editors, lawyers and civil society activists—associated with print, electronic and digital media. It also documents the frequency and types of attacks on journalists and asks whether such attacks have changed face in the past decade as journalists increasingly use online platforms to hold power to account.

The evidence cited in this report finds that the incumbent government has served the interests of the state more than any previous government when it comes to stifling critical news coverage. We have therefore selected the period after 2018 to analyse the relationship between the PTI government and state and non-state actors with the media. We argue that press censorship, regulatory media control mechanisms and intimidatory tactics are worsening as the government and security apparatus subvert freedom of expression and access to public information by threatening and abducting journalists. That the PTI government is openly suppressing freedom of expression and actively participating in online trends to discredit influential journalists—including attacks on women critical of government policies on online platforms—is indicative that press freedom has taken a serious battering since the 2018 election.

A new censorship mechanism in August 2021—the Pakistan Media Development Authority (PDMA)—was introduced in the garb of protecting journalists. What followed was strong resistance from media bodies who termed this kind of media control akin to holding a ‘martial law mindset’. This unified opposition prompted the government to relent for the time being at least. Other

¹ https://www.ifj.org/fileadmin/user_upload/IFJ_white_book__part_1.pdf.

covert methods of censorship include halting newspaper distribution; instructing cable operators to switch television channels' position; cutting advertisements' share to channels and newspapers that question government policies and institutions; and removing anchors and journalists who choose to report the truth as opposed to towing the state line.

Government advertising is used to control editorial content and silence dissenting voices in the press, especially in the case of the Dawn and Jang media groups. In February 2020, the Dawn Media Group filed a petition in the Sindh High Court challenging the ban on advertising, stating that it was a punishment for its reporting and editorial stances. However, media organisations and their employees who were unable to withstand financial pressures that came with the loss of advertising revenues, succumbed to information controls on their programming. This has meant that large segments of the population are no longer consuming independent, well-researched news and information.

Based on semi-structured interviews with journalists, analysts, lawyers and editors working in traditional and digital media, this report examines the media environment as it has transformed after 2018. It is structured into three sections. The first part looks at the struggle for a free press through selected case studies, demonstrating that the media remains hostage to repressive tactics and that critical reporting results in violations against journalists. It will also document stories of women journalists to demonstrate the severity and impact of the threats and harassment they face in the line of duty and how this puts their personal and professional safety at risk.

The second part discusses how both the government and state has pushed the media into a tight corner, compelling owners and editors to follow certain directives or otherwise face dangerous consequences. The third part will focus on the media landscape in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), documenting the nature of threats journalists have faced for more than two decades. These have intensified in recent years, stifling news reporting and access to information. In doing so, this section will look at how journalists, including women, work under difficult circumstances.

While this report documents the struggle of the media to preserve its voice, it also reiterates the need for self-regulation within the media industry and training for journalists' safety. If journalism is to remain a force for good and journalists find space and freedom to present facts in the public interest without threat of retribution, they must understand there is safety in unity and in responsible reporting. When the media industry remains polarised, failing to speak up on issues that impact its working, we see more incidents of intimidation and attacks, and enforced censorship on news outlets.

Silencing a critical media: The battle for a free press

Pakistan has one of the freest presses in the world ... To say there are curbs on the Pakistan press is a joke.

Prime Minister Imran Khan at a USIP press conference, Washington, July 2019.

Who attacked Absar Alam and why?

On the evening of 20 April 2021, the near-fatal shooting of Islamabad-based journalist Absar Alam in a park outside his home was shocking for one reason: it was brazen. Shot in the abdomen by an unidentified man in a brown shalwar kameez, he recalls the assailant walked past him a few times before attacking him. This man was captured on CCTV strolling in the park while talking to another man in a black outfit and trainers before he shot Alam. Bleeding, Alam walked out of the park when two passers-by took him to the hospital. They saved my life, he says.² Despite CCTV footage, no arrests have been made, sending a chilling message to journalists reporting on sensitive subjects—that they must watch their step.

A former Aaj TV presenter (2009–15) and chairman of the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) (2015–17), Alam knows that the consequences for journalists who push back are harsh. He has been barred from TV and print media—even from appearing as a guest analyst. He received a summons from the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) in September 2020 for his Twitter posts that were critical of the interference of the establishment in politics. When a sedition case was filed against Alam, he was accused of using ‘derogatory language’ against state institutions and Prime Minister Khan.³ After he was banned from traditional media, he created a Twitter account in 2016/17, posting political commentary. “I didn’t expect any kind of audience on Twitter. I just wanted to write and had approached a few newspapers who denied me space,” he said.

“The first court case ever to be filed against me while I was still at PEMRA in 2016 [he was appointed chair by former Prime Minister Sharif] was for not clamping down on Najam Sethi [a Geo TV journalist/host] when he made a reference to institutional corruption. After which around 27 treason cases were filed against me, Sethi and Mir Shakil-ur-Rehman [owner of Geo TV] in small cities,” Alam explains.⁴

² Interview with Absar Alam, 9 September 2021

³ <https://nayadaur.tv/2020/09/high-treason-case-filed-against-journalist-absar-alam/>

⁴ <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1310224/baseless-allegations-fir-registered-geo-owner-anchors>.

In separate interviews over three months, more than two dozen journalists and editors concur that the media industry is in a challenging phase because of increasing threats from the state, non-state actors and the judiciary, including intense pressure from the security establishment. Additionally, they cite financial pressure with cuts on advertising revenue and increasing job losses. When asked about who exerts pressure on journalists, many mention ‘the establishment,’ ‘the agencies’ and the country’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency.⁵ One measure of seeing how things change is self-censorship. “Five years ago, I was less concerned because it was MQM-related violence against the media but now I censor much more and I have no qualms in saying so,” says Ayesha Azfar, editor at the op-ed section at *Dawn*. She has experienced successive governments’ treatment of the media over the years but fears that this is the worst period of self-censorship. Even editorial cartoons must be carefully vetted in case they come across as too scathing.⁶ Digital rights activist and *Dawn* columnist Usama Khilji explains topics such as the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) are banned from discussion and even mentioning Ahmadis is not permitted—the use of the term ‘religious minority’ is preferable. “My column on social media rules, for example, got a lot of comments; readers said if there is no press freedom then I would not be permitted to write this column. They use my advocacy for press freedom to say there is freedom.”

“On TV, one has to be very careful when it comes to religious issues for instance. Besides political polarisation, there is religious fanaticism because one fears blasphemy charges if what one says is misinterpreted,” says Mehmud Sarfraz, an analyst for Geo TV’s ‘Report Card’ and co-host of ‘Aurat Card’. Journalists explain that the apparent ‘red lines’ include issues of national security, questioning the military’s role in affairs of the state, (foreign policy, missing-persons cases), rights violations, religious extremism and terrorism. For some editors, even reporting on the Covid-19 pandemic results is unsettling the authorities.

Veteran journalist and Geo TV analyst Mazhar Abbas explains how journalists get flagged for their work. “If you write one story on CPEC [China-Pakistan Economic Corridor], for instance, you might not be watched as closely as opposed to someone who consistently writes on the project. They look to check if you are critical, very critical or completely opposing government policy—they judge it from different angles. Similarly, if you are active on social media they will

⁵ The ‘establishment’ is a term used widely to imply the military and intelligence agencies in Pakistan. Many editors and journalists asked for anonymity when interviewed for this report. They explained press freedom is shrinking especially in recent years after the PTI government came to power because of the control exercised by the establishment over news reports, TV programming and removal of journalists from media outlets.

⁶ Interview with Ayesha Azfar, 8 October 2021

follow your opinion, how critical you are, what language or expression you use.”⁷ The follow-up stories bring the spotlight onto critical reporters who deal with subjects in public interest.

Online abuse and attacks against women journalists

“There are many red lines when you post on Twitter. This government wants dissenting voices to be silenced,” says Mehmala Sarfraz. Since 2014, she has suffered vile online attacks, labelled a ‘traitor’ and given death threats.

When journalist Benazir Shah tweeted a story by *The Current* on an unhygienic quarantine centre in Peshawar, both she and Mehmala Sarfraz were subjected to organised trolling. “KP minister Taimur Jhagra targeted Benazir Shah for tweeting the story. I felt a sense of responsibility because we had published the story. First, I responded by saying it was not about class or privilege, but basic hygiene at a facility. We had videos which we didn’t post because they were terribly graphic. Right after, there would be five to ten daily attempts to hack my Twitter account for days. There were efforts to hack Benazir’s account as well,” Sarfraz explains.

Women in the news industry weather offline and online attacks as an ugly reality of the job. Nearly three-quarters of the 714 women journalists responding to a 2021 ICFJ-UNESCO survey said they had experienced online violence in their profession.⁸ While disinformation in gendered online violence is employed routinely, the role of political actors in instigating online violence campaigns is another factor. Women report that online violence has taken a toll on their mental health, making them fear for their physical safety, damaging their reputations and often forcing them to quit working. Benazir Shah, a Geo News journalist and presenter on ‘Aurat Card’, has been the target of a consistent online trolling campaign, especially for her daily Covid-19 updates. “The pattern I noticed is that it starts with a government official accusing you of fake news or taking bribes, like a senior health official with the PTI in KP discrediting me on my Covid-19 reporting. Then anonymous accounts troll you. Others like Shahbaz Gill (the Prime Minister’s special assistant on political communication), Azhar Mashwani (focal person to the chief minister of Punjab), and the ministry of information Twitter handle such as ‘Fake news busters’ (a twitter handle that labels journalists as ‘fake’ news spreaders [@factcheckpk]) follow suit. They tag you, discredit you for spreading fake news or taking money from the opposition,” says Shah.⁹

Hosting a programme on Aaj TV, an independent television channel with some of the most vocal female journalists on its roster, Asma Shirazi was trolled

⁷ Interview with Mazhar Abbas, 30 September 2021

⁸ <https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/the-chilling.pdf>

⁹ Interview with Benazir Shah, 21 September 2021

viciously in October 2021. Her column for BBC Urdu’s website on Pakistan’s shambolic state of the economy and the urgent need to fix the situation was the point of contention. The trolling was followed by PTI’s official Twitter handle posting a 2018 video conversation between Shirazi and the former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif accusing her of ‘obedience’ to a ‘certified *chor* (thief) and absconder.’ Attacked on Twitter by government representatives, Shirazi became the subject of a press conference by Gill who lashed out against her writing, instigating more attacks on her person and work. This was perceived as an attack on press freedom, demonstrating the wider trend of governments using and endorsing trolls at their disposal to silence critical journalism, especially to vilify and discredit women as ‘anti-state’. “When they attack your integrity, it is very painful. But we are going to speak despite the harassment. If we speak, we will be killed, if we do not speak, we will be killed,” she explains. In her case and in instances where journalists’ reputations are defamed online and offline, perpetrators can be investigated under PECA laws for online violence, a punishable offence, but the impunity accorded to them only indicates attacks by state-supported trolls are acceptable. Instead, journalists have been targeted under this law.¹⁰

PTI ministers have now boycotted Asma Shirazi’s news show. She also faces prosecution for treason in a case registered in Gujranwala by a ‘serial petitioner’ (known to register cases against journalists) after speaking out at a media rally supporting journalist, Asad Ali Toor (attacked in May 2021) and condemning the suspension of Hamid Mir from Geo TV. “Women journalists are easier to target because you can make them suffer more as it involves their families and children. Calling me anti-Pakistan and a traitor in the past is instigating others to attack me,” Shirazi says.¹¹

The politics of pressure

2018 marked the beginning of difficult times for the media. Behind PTI’s candidate Imran Khan, it was the military establishment exercising power, a senior editor explains on condition of anonymity. The signs were present in the immediate run-up to the election that year as the media came under unprecedented pressure when the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) government was besieged in its last days. The press quickly learnt to self-censor when reporting on the state and military establishment. Those who did not acquiesce were threatened and harassed—in many cases abducted and beaten, he says.

¹⁰ Section 20 of PECA introduces criminal defamation and has been weaponised against women who speak out about their harassers, and journalists and activists who question government policies.

¹¹ Interview with Asma Shirazi, 21 October 2021

As the election drew nearer, the establishment marked certain journalists as anti-state, pressurising TV channels and newspapers to remove those who failed to avoid controversial subjects. It quietly and effectively set restrictions on reporting on foreign policy, religious extremism, CPEC and human rights violations through direct and indirect methods of intimidation, according to news editors. Primetime television presenters and editors say that direct calls to editors and media owners were routinely made, expressing displeasure about political coverage and warnings to reign in certain anchors, if not remove them altogether. This became an ongoing practice as news outlets laid off journalists under pressure, citing financial constraints. “This kind of engagement had already started to manipulate the entire narrative of the court cases [Panama cases and cases against Mr Sharif] and then, later the election. This intervention [to pressure the media] had started before the election and then was institutionalised after the elections,” Talat Aslam, editor at *The News International* explains.¹²

When Asad Ali Toor was recruited by Dunya News to run the election cell in Lahore, he had been singled out as ‘anti-state’ for his reporting by the military establishment. “As I begun gathering information on constituencies, candidates, tribes, etc., and started making a story board about the campaign with my team, the management told me to keep my head low. The pressure must have increased which is when they told me to refrain from working for a month.” He would sit in the office for ten hours doing nothing. When he did not resign, they allowed him to restart the election cell and so he began working with the same passion. Then, in March [2018] he was asked by the head of news to ‘stop working hard.’ Toor was told by the head of news: “We know what the results of this election will be because it is decided. Don’t bother with what candidate will break which party.” He was told to stop tweeting his opinions because he was under observation. When he retweeted opinion columns, he was asked to quit tweeting entirely. He resigned eventually because he felt suffocated.¹³

Media coverage of the elections was found to be extensive but partisan without journalistic scrutiny and dominated by paid-for content according to a European Union report (2018). It stated the media featured “the three-horse race between the PTI, the PML-N and PPP, coverage of which was tainted by corruption scandals and driven by court decisions.” The tone lent to coverage around the PML-N was negative whereas PPP coverage was mostly neutral or positive, and the same applied for the PTI.¹⁴

Successive governments are known to influence private media outlets through censorship directives and controlling advertisements. Media outlets are

¹² Interview with Talat Aslam, 14 September 2021

¹³ Interview with Asad Ali Toor, 15 September 2021

¹⁴ http://www.cods.eu/library/final_report_pakistan_2018_english.pdf.

threatened with withdrawal of advertisements when they adopt a hard-line approach towards government policies. TV channels are jammed when they air interviews with opposition politicians (Hamid Mir's interview with former president Asif Ali Zardari was stopped on Geo TV in July 2019) or discuss issues related to the military.¹⁵

The private media sector's financial model is an important factor because it allows this sector to remain vulnerable to control and constraints by the state, the military and other actors. According to Mazhar Abbas, advertisement rates were doubled before the 2013 election and a huge chunk went to television channels that the PML-N-led government perceived as favouring itself. "With the PTI government those rates were slashed and they went back to the 2013 position [of advertisement rates]," Abbas explains. Was it a legal doubling of advertisement rates at the time in 2013 by the PML-N because the party might have wanted favourable coverage? "That is the perception. It was doubled before the 2013 elections so that created a suspicion that the PML-N wanted to win over media houses," says Abbas. Political parties bought primetime advertisement slots to appease media owners. "Programme durations were reduced to 15 minutes, killing content for commercial interests. I was at Express TV when I argued with the channel owner on the last day of the 2013 election campaign, saying we should give more time to content, but the opinion was that advertisements were coming in and it was the time to earn revenue," Abbas adds. Some media watchers believe layoffs as a result of these revenue cuts were a way for the government to stifle criticism. One journalist (anonymous) explains, "*Dawn* newspaper, Geo News, Aaj TV are despised the most by this government, so they've cut their advertisement revenues. They have used money as a carrot-and-stick policy. Money is given to Hum TV, Bol, Samaa TV, 92 News HD. If you switch to ARY you'll see government ads that you won't see on Dawn News, Geo TV and Aaj TV."

This is what happened in the summer of 2018 when a financial crisis hit the industry as government revenue was slashed by the PTI. TV channels such as Waqt TV and the bureau offices of others in Peshawar, Quetta and Multan shut down. When the Jang Group shut down three publications and two bureau offices, more than 900 journalists lost jobs in a day (Rehmat, 2019). Pay cuts happened at the Dawn Media Group and Express Media and the Dunya Group retrenched 200 workers.¹⁶

Highly reliant on advertisement revenues, traditional media competes for government resources, which implies that certain media outlets will not offend state actors offering advertisement revenues. Money is, therefore, used as a tool to censor information, slowly killing the media's credibility for audiences.

¹⁵ <https://www.dawn.com/news/1491551>.

¹⁶ <https://www.dawn.com/news/1495230>.

Another practice is shuffling channel numbers. Cable operators are instructed to ‘bury’ certain channels in the line-up order or even remove them. Take the case of Geo News: even with its popularity and market share, it was not spared when, in April 2018, local cable distributors halted its transmission without warning—one neither sanctioned by the government’s regulatory authority nor the ministry of information. This ban ended with negotiations between the military and the network bosses, the latter ensuring that the coverage did not cross the military’s red lines, according to editors wanting anonymity. Geo News had not been a favourite of the establishment ever since the 2014 attack on journalist Hamid Mir, known for his primetime programme *Capital Talk*, when Mir’s brother alleged the ISI was responsible for the attack in Karachi.

Old new ‘red lines’

By 2018, the muzzling of columnists had become more serious—a practice that gradually evolved into self-censorship, the art of learning what not to say. On 28 May, journalist and columnist Talat Hussain tweeted that *The News* published by the Jang Group had not printed his weekly column on the state of democracy which ironically talked about systematic censorship among other issues. He tweeted the article. The following month columnist Mosharraf Zaidi tweeted his rejected article for the same newspaper for the first time in a decade.¹⁷ When lawyer Babar Sattar’s Saturday column was pulled out of the same newspaper, he tweeted it using the hashtag #TheAgeOfFreelyControlledMedia.¹⁸ He posted on Twitter that the media was banned from mentioning the PTM.¹⁹ Since then, coverage of the PTM, its rallies and interviews with its leaders are banned on TV and in print. “The red lines have been broadened. Now anything can be asked not to be reported,” explains Iqbal Khattak, director at Freedom Network. He explains, “Journalists, especially in KP and Balochistan are using self-censorship as a tool to protect themselves and their families. For the past three years, we have seen fewer attacks on journalists in Balochistan for that reason. This is not an indicator that the press is free in the province, but that censorship is at its peak.”²⁰

In May 2018, *Dawn*’s distribution was interrupted when the country’s oldest English daily was banned from circulation in Larkana, Sukkur, the military’s cantonment areas all across Pakistan and other locations. Delivery vans were

¹⁷ <https://www.rferl.org/a/everybody-is-scared-pakistani-media-fighting---and-losing---battle-with-extreme-censorship/29268374.html>.

¹⁸ <https://www.dawn.com/news/1405304>.

¹⁹ PTM is a human rights movement based in KP and Balochistan which started in 2018. It was founded as the Mahsud Tahafuz Movement in 2014 by eight students in Dera Ismail Khan. PTM is a red line for the media—since around 2018 media outlets were barred from discussing PTM, discussing the movement or its demands or even interview its leaders.

²⁰ Interview with Iqbal Khattak, 8 September 2021

attacked. This disruption happened, according to editors at the newspaper, because it published an interview with ousted Prime Minister Sharif in which he alleged the army had backed militants, essentially commenting on tenuous civil-military relations.²¹

Censoring criticism of the military and suppressing any perceived bias towards the PML-N—including media coverage of Sharif’s anti-judiciary speeches after his disqualification—became prerequisites for survival.²² Because many writers were considered anti-state if deemed secular or liberal, the practice of killing stories came about and continues into the present. “It is not in their [the government’s] DNA to be tolerant. They are insecure and this stems from them realising they do not have democratic legitimacy. They want any kind of political opposition out of the way so they can’t be challenged,” says columnist Usama Khilji.

‘Direct-dialling’ to kill stories

Enforced censorship through direct and indirect acts of intimidation has become the new norm under the PTI-led government. This censorship is applied to presenters, activists and analysts defending democratic freedoms and rights. Editors with print and electronic media explain that, in the last four years, there has been a substantial increase in direct phone calls from the establishment advising or complaining about coverage and asking to tone down or black out news stories. Most will not talk about it openly. They claim if they air speeches or statements by former PML-N leaders, they are punished; if presenters invite opposition party ministers onto talk shows, they are asked to kill the segment or the anchor is removed if she questions the state’s economic policies. If they talk about India or Afghanistan and security policies, they are branded ‘anti-state’. If they give coverage to water protests in Gwadar or talk about Pashtun nationalism, they will be shut down. If they talk about child marriage and forced marriage, they are ‘too liberal’, garnering objections from religious parties.

The pressure from the establishment is real. Research by the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) finds that the military, intelligence or military-linked and political groups were ‘the suspected source of fire that resulted in half of the 22 journalist murders in the past decade.’²³ It is also the murkiness of control,

²¹ As an assistant editor at *Dawn* at the time I was aware of the pressure under which journalists and reporters worked including the need to be cautious regarding editorial output, especially coverage of PML-N’s key leadership and their speeches.

²² In 2016 when journalist Cyril Almeida reported the happenings from the proceedings of a national security council meeting—what was later termed as ‘Dawn leaks’—his report eventually led to the resignation of the information minister. *Dawn* editors refused to name their sources, and Almeida came under immense fire [he was slapped with treason charges in September 2018] and the paper suffered financial suppression and its circulation disturbed.

²³ https://cpj.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/cpj_pakistan_report_20180911_web.pdf.

intimidation and even violence that remains unidentifiable which makes it increasingly dangerous for the press to do its job.

While many opposition leaders refrain from harshly critiquing the military establishment, it was Sharif's criticism that was considered significant. However, his views were not aired on mainstream TV channels in October 2020 under the PEMRA ruling banning the broadcast of interviews and public addresses by 'absconders and proclaimed offenders'. Earlier in 2019, PEMRA had issued notices to 21 TV channels and taken three off air (Abb Takk, 24 News HD and Capital TV) for airing PML-N leader Maryam Nawaz's live and unedited speech. This was met with outrage by the Pakistan Federation Union of Journalists (PFUJ). The Karachi Union of Journalists noted, "PEMRA was acting like a dictator reminding us of the time when there was no freedom of the media. The government is unable to tolerate any criticism."²⁴ Terming it 'direct dialling' to kill stories and information vital in the public interest, media owners are issued directives by the establishment to refrain from asking hard questions around certain issues and policies. Some journalists explain they are sent briefs or information about key opposition leaders to malign them on news shows. Some are told not to post tweets when too critical.

When Hamid Mir called out the military at a protest rally against an attack on Asad Toor in Islamabad (May 2021), he was removed from presenting his news show, Capital Talk. "I have survived many assassination attacks and now I face a long ban. The big difference between Musharraf's regime and this government is that he took the responsibility to ban me and I was banned through PEMRA from appearing on TV but I was not restricted from writing in newspapers. This regime is worse because they do not take responsibility and there is no black-and-white order or notice from PEMRA. I cannot prove anywhere that I am banned. I was told on the telephone by the Geo News management that I could not do my show and that I should be considered on leave."²⁵ Despite outrage in support of Mir, he has not been allowed back on air, sending a chilling message to the media that it must acquiesce to the demands made by the establishment.

For now, Mir is temporarily resigned to his fate. His Twitter posts supporting press freedom, accountability and justice are telling about the state of the nation. Small relief came in October 2021 when he started a regular column with the *Washington Post*. Though part of Pakistan's largest news media conglomerate, the Jang Group, Geo TV has been squeezed editorially and financially on many occasions. Mir was harassed when he covered stories about enforced disappearances in Balochistan, but somehow rode the wave of repression until recently when the channel was compelled to make editorial compromises to

²⁴ <https://www.ifj.org/media-centre/news/detail/category/press-releases/article/pakistan-three-tv-channels-taken-down-after-airing-opposition-leaders-live-speech.html>.

²⁵ Interview with Hamid Mir, 8 September 2021

survive. In March 2020, the owner of the Jang Group which owns Geo TV and *The News* was detained over accusations of corruption in a land case over three decades old, which he denies. Mir Shakil-ur-Rehman's arrest was seen as an attack on the freedom of press with Reporters Without Borders stating that he was targeted because his media group 'dared tackle stories that are supposed to be off-limits.'²⁶

"As editors, we don't know any more what the red lines are because suddenly you are told that you can't take a particular story on a certain day. This defies logic and often you don't understand why you need to downplay stories. But there is fear among editors after MSR [Mir Shakil-ur-Rahman] was taken. I think we are playing it much safer. More risky, combative stories are not published. The Islamabad investigative desk has been disbanded. Even op-ed pages driving the ethos and ideology of the newspaper that are often quite independent in the English-language press have toned down their critique of institutions and the government in recent times," Talat Aslam says.²⁷

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In October 2020, BBC Urdu's flagship news programme *Sairbeen* stopped broadcasting its news bulletins on Aaj TV citing "interference" in its news bulletins.²⁸ The "interference" was a euphemism for censorship of content because of pressure from the political and military establishment. "We were unable to compromise on editorial integrity," says a journalist who asked not to be named. "The last story we ran on the show was about a skirmish and firing on the Line of Control in September 2020, and we ran a story from both sides of the border where the mortars hit. Aaj TV was pressurised to shut down the programme. BBC Urdu went to see the Prime Minister in November 2020 about the programme and realised the control was not with the Prime Minister—that it was coming from elsewhere. We told them we want the programme on air again and, if it does not happen within a timeframe, we would have to issue a statement stating reasons for shutting down the programme. Ultimately nothing happened."

For journalist Munizae Jahangir, this is the blackest period in the short history of Pakistan's electronic media under a civilian government. As a presenter on Aaj TV, she is also co-founder of a digital news platform Voice.pk. She is not one to

²⁶ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/11/9/pakistan-media-mogul-granted-bail-after-200-days-in-detention>. Over the years, it appears the Jang Group is more vulnerable because Geo TV has access to the masses, and therefore, civilian governments and the establishment want control over it. In November 2020, the country's Supreme Court granted bail to Rehman after 200 days in detention.

²⁷ Interview with Talat Aslam, 14 September 2021

²⁸ <https://www.dawn.com/news/1601847>.

shy away from speaking truth to power—the difference is she has mastered the art of holding her own on TV, presenting facts to back her reports. We talk about censorship, media bans and her fiery speech outside the National Press Club the same day Mir gave the speech that cost him his career.²⁹ “By far, Hamid Mir is the most popular journalist in Pakistan, but they have made him un-hireable and placed an unannounced ban on him. Whoever brings him on air will be shut down,” she tells me.³⁰ Only earlier that week she had (@MunizaeJahangir) posted: “At 8pm I would instinctively tune into Geo to @HamidMirPAK Capital Talk. I would ascertain the national narrative through his talk show, his absence is a gaping hole in the local media landscape. @geonews_urdu show some spine (No offense to Munib who I respect)” [5 October 2021. 8:38pm. Twitter]

* * *

Mazhar Abbas has struggled for decades for freedom of expression. Having held positions of authority at various television channels, he explains the media is facing unprecedented stifling. When we spoke, he had returned from a protest camp outside parliament in Islamabad where media practitioners supported by opposition politicians demonstrated with a united voice against the proposed Pakistan Media Development Authority (PMDA) or what they term ‘media martial law.’ “We know there are measures that authoritarian rulers adopt towards journalists and the kind of legislation expected during military rule but when a civilian government behaves in a similar fashion, it is regrettable and condemnable,” Abbas says. For its part, the government said it was replacing a ‘fractured regulatory environment.’ For instance, the ordinance requires media outlets—print, digital and electronic—to annually renew their license and adhere to a code of conduct yet to be formulated. Under this law, media tribunals would have the power to summon producers for explanations, penalise and fine journalists and media outlets who violate the code of conduct or are accused of publishing ‘fake news.’ “Nobody asked for it, nobody wants it,” journalist Benazir Shah says.³¹

Censorship and the importance of language

For years, Zia-ur-Rehman reporting for *The News* and *The New York Times* was adventurous when seeking out stories on militancy, crime, and violence in Karachi and Quetta, even Afghanistan, when I travelled with him on a reporting assignment. However, his carefree reporting days are history—for now at least.

²⁹ Journalists gathered in solidarity outside the National Press Club in Islamabad on 28 May 2021 to protest the attack on Asad Ali Toor where Hamid Mir, Munizae Jahangir and others gave short speeches.

³⁰ Interview with Munizae Jahangir, 7 October 2021

³¹ Interview with Benazir Shah, 21 September 2021

Journalists have refrained from reporting on blasphemy cases since the rise of extremist parties and their influence, such as far-right outfit Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP). “Because the issue of blasphemy has been politicised and there is an increase in attacks on Ahmadis, on religious temples, on the organisers of the Aurat March, bloggers, journalists, editors discourage you from reporting on these stories,” he explains.

Rehman points to the importance of language. “When the international media uses the word ‘mosque’ for places of worship for Ahmadis, we tell them to use ‘places of worship,’ because Ahmadis are not seen as Muslims under the Pakistan law. They send you the edited story so you can change words. For a global readership, they use ‘Muslim’ for describing Ahmadis, but we say ‘religious minority sect’ in the story. We only discuss victims—we report a killing, for instance, but we do not discuss whether Pakistan declaring them non-Muslims is wrong or right, no opinion is given on this aspect.”³²

Television channels never air blasphemy stories. Mahim Maher, editor for Samaa TV’s digital news site, tells me her team was trained to edit blasphemy stories by PurAzm Pakistan [a media campaign launched by the Ministry of information and broadcasting], which trains on disinformation and counter-narrative work. All questions and fears were discussed, she says. “If our reporter doesn’t do the story, we tap into others we know through networks. Or we get the reporter to give us the local police numbers, or we get a contact of a local religious party. You won’t find these stories on our YouTube channel because they won’t be aired.”³³

Ethical journalism improves the press freedom environment. Reporters in KP and Balochistan say that when colleagues compromise their ethical standards, they become vulnerable to attacks from all quarters. Training journalists in ethical standards, offering safety advice when reporting on sensitive stories from conflict zones, providing legal assistance and solidarity, improving the quality of citizen journalism, teaching reporters how to fact-check and report on both sides of a story are all important recommendations. Moreover, the existence of ethical journalism will remove the state’s justification for controlling information.

³² Interview with Zia-ur-Rehman, 7 August 2021

³³ Interview with Mahim Maher, 28 September 2021

Cracking down: How ‘red lines’ and cybercrime laws became favoured methods of press control

Journalists can't work, media organisations are denied advertisements, reporters are jailed, shot and abducted, media owners are in jail, so media outlets only prioritise survival under these circumstances.

Anonymous

The thrashing after Eid

After recurring warnings of an impending assault, Asad Ali Toor was attacked in his Islamabad apartment on 25 May 2021 after the Eid holidays. Three armed assailants barged into his apartment and bound and gagged him with his shirt. The attackers identified themselves as belonging to the ISI. The agency denied involvement. Toor was questioned on the sources of his income and forced to shout slogans in praise of Pakistan, the military and the ISI, and abuse against India, Afghanistan and Israel.³⁴ He was beaten viciously on his elbows with the butt of a pistol till they bled. They become stiff with pain when not moved frequently, he says. Disturbed by the commotion, his pet parrot tried to attack the assailants. During the attack, an assailant shot videos for ‘the boss,’ while another sat on top of Toor, restraining his arms as his accomplice repeatedly beat his face and elbows. “I haven’t experienced as much pain. I wanted to yell but I was gagged.”

Investigations into cases of attacks against journalists are weak, explains lawyer Imaan Mazari-Hazir. She is on Toor’s legal team which assisted the police in their investigations, suggesting the need for geofencing because one of the assailants had received a phone call so they advised searching for a common number from where all three assailants might have received a call.³⁵ Mazari-Hazir works with the Journalists Defence Committee (JDC) representing clients pro bono such as Toor, Matiullah Jan, Absar Alam, Arshad Suleri and others.³⁶ Though the attack on Toor happened in May 2021, the police have yet to share the case file with his lawyers as per the court order, she explains. The investigating officer on Toor’s case was switched thrice. Although the interior minister, Sheikh Rashid Ahmed, announced they were close to tracing one of the perpetrators through fingerprints (in June 2021), we have not seen the reports obtained from forensics, she says.

³⁴ Interview with Asad Ali Toor, 15 September 2021

³⁵ Interview with Imaan Mazari-Hazir, 29 September 2021

³⁶ The JDC was established on 29 September 2020 by the Pakistan Bar Council offering free legal assistance to journalists at a time when the physical and online safety of the media is under threat.

Should journalists have to pay such a high price for doing a job that leaves them with physical and psychological scars?

Lack of political will to prosecute the killers of journalists, weak police investigations and judicial mechanisms have perpetuated a cycle of violence. According to Freedom Network, attacks against the press increased by 40 percent between May 2020 and April 2021—148 cases of attacks and violations against news media outlets and practitioners were reported.³⁷ Prime Minister Khan dismissed the allegations of curbs on press freedom as a ‘joke’ at a discussion in Washington DC, claiming he faced criticism from the press.³⁸ His ministers downplay abductions and attacks on the press. In an interview with BBC’s Hard Talk programme, Information Minister Fawad Chaudhry stated there was a ‘history’ of people using the name of intelligence agencies to get asylum abroad.³⁹

Despite CCTV evidence in the shooting of Absar Alam and the abduction of journalist Matiullah Jan in the same city for a number of hours by ‘unknown’ men, investigations to identify the perpetrators have reached nowhere. Yet many in the media know who is responsible. The message given is that the media has crossed the ‘red line’ and its continued impertinence is unacceptable. At least 27 incidents in which media persons were physically assaulted in connection with their work by government officials, including the police, lawyers, powerful businesspersons and other unidentified individuals, were recorded last year alone (January to October 2021) by the Pakistan Press Foundation.⁴⁰

The price of journalism: Lost jobs, legal cases and professional isolation

According to Freedom Network Pakistan’s 2020 report, the three top categories of violations against journalists are: slapping legal charges on journalists, verbal threats of murder or dire consequences, and their arrest and detention by law enforcement agencies. “Talking about the army chief or critiquing the military establishment or their conduct would take a TV channel off air, so you have to use ways of criticising in a subtle manner,” Murtaza Solangi explains. Four years into presenting a primetime news show, Solangi lost his job at Capital TV in 2018. The trouble started when he interviewed PML-N leader Siddiq-ul-Farooq on the anniversary of 12 October—General Musharraf’s coup d’état Fifteen minutes into the programme, it was stopped. The managing director issued a show cause notice to Solangi and his team.⁴¹

³⁷ <https://www.fnpk.org/freedom-network-annual-press-freedom-report-2020/>.

³⁸ <https://www.dawn.com/news/1497391>.

³⁹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/w3ct1n16>.

⁴⁰ <https://www.pakistanpressfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/PPFs-Report-on-Attacks-on-Media-in-Pakistan-2021.pdf>.

⁴¹ Interview with Murtaza Solangi, 17 September 2021

Reporters like Toor who has covered 41 hearings of the case against Supreme Court Justice Qazi Faez Isa (based on a presidential reference filed in May 2020 alleging Justice Isa had not declared his assets) want to do their job without fear or favour. “It was history in the making [Justice Isa hearings] so I wanted to cover it extensively like I did the Panama case. I started reporting for Naya Daur Media, documenting details about the body language of judges, the environment of the courtroom. Newspapers were told not to report details and intricacies of the case,” he tells me. Toor thought no one would read his 6,000-word ramblings from the courtroom. To test if there was a readership for his stories from the courtroom, he would post a teaser on Twitter that said: ‘hearing concluded, story coming shortly.’ Before long, he realised there was massive interest in this case and that readers would wait eagerly for his story on Naya Daur. His stories were increasingly shared on social media. Then, one day in court, Justice Umer Atta Bandial asked Barrister Farogh Nasim if they could send Sarina Isa (the wife of Justice Isa) to the Federal Bureau of Revenue court. Mr Nasim came out during the recess, consulted with two men who had come to court everyday but were not reporters nor part of the legal team. Toor’s story for that day’s hearing included the presence of two unknown men appearing daily, keenly observing the proceedings, sending reports during the recess. Yet they were not journalists. And on that particular day Mr Nasim took direction from them.

The next day, Toor was harshly reprimanded for crossing the limits by a source in the government’s legal team. No one saw the two men in court again. He was told by colleagues that his reports had influenced the minds of the judges. “The judiciary is meant to protect our freedom of expression under Article 19, but in this instance, it felt that they were harassing us when we wrote on this case.” Within that week (July 2020), Matiullah Jan, who had also reported on the case, was abducted a day before he was scheduled to appear before the Supreme Court in a case where he was accused of ‘using derogatory/contemptuous language and maligning the institution of judiciary’ through an alleged Twitter post-dated 13 June 2020 alluding to attacks on Justice Isa.⁴²

On 12 September 2020, Toor was charged under the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act 2016 (PECA) for propagating against the army and the country on social media by a former spokesperson of Lal Masjid. Two other journalists were also accused of ‘spreading hatred’ against the state and its institutions, including Bilal Farooqi in Karachi and Absar Alam in Islamabad, charged with sedition for their Twitter posts.⁴³ This also raises the question of abuse of legislation to

⁴² <https://www.dawn.com/news/1570325>.

⁴³ Interview with Absar Alam, 9 September and interview with Bilal Farooqi, 27 September 2021

protect citizens which is used to strip their fundamental rights. Section 20 of PECA introduces criminal defamation and has been weaponised against women who speak out about their harassers, and journalists and activists who question government policies. Section 37 is being used to censor content on the internet and to compel social media companies to comply with the state, which wants to control content through the Pakistan Telecommunications Authority (PTA).

“When the PML-N came up with PECA, activists advocated against this law, but they were criticised for PECA having a foreign-funded agenda. One time the complainant in a PECA-related case was a blacksmith in Gujranwala with no idea what the case was all about, though he had apparently filed the complaint. Plausible deniability as in we [the authorities implied] didn’t say anything but a citizen complained,” Usama Khilji explains.⁴⁴ In September 2020, information circulated on social media that the FIA was reportedly registering cases against 49 activists and journalists. Terming it ‘disturbing news’ in a Twitter post, the minister for human rights Shireen Mazari responded that a private citizen had sent a complaint against 12 journalists to the FIA.⁴⁵ Lawyers representing journalists explain the FIA is far from protecting citizens or even interested in investigating complaints of harassment by women journalists. Rather, they say, it loses investigation files and is absent from court hearings.

⁴⁴ Interview with Usama Khilji, 18 October 2021

⁴⁵ <https://www.dawn.com/news/1581563>.

Killing news and information: Why KP and Balochistan remain closed off

Journalists in KP and Balochistan are caught in the middle of state and non-state actors when doing their job. These are where militancy, underdevelopment, ethnic and religious unrest have combined to produce violent backlash and the media is not exempt. According to Syed Irfan Ashraf, journalist and professor at the University of Peshawar, these political tensions can be traced back to Partition.⁴⁶ Drawing on his experiences as a reporter, Ashraf has written an important book documenting the role of the local media in the tribal region and his experiences as a reporter covering the Swat Valley at the height of terrorism.⁴⁷ He tells me the current security regime is working on occupying civilian spaces, not just limited to information control but on capturing people's minds with a particular narrative. "Before 2001, the military did not control FATA. Though present in Wana and some other areas, they were confined [to their barracks], and the civilian administration had been present since colonial times. In the past 20 years, the tribal region has been militarised. It has only thrust its extreme point since 2018. The civilian administration was taken hostage; the entire dispensation and infrastructure that has evolved since are controlling the borders, for instance. These borders are huge assets for military powers and increasing militarisation in this region. Given a 2,600-kilometre border from Bajaur to Balochistan means the presence of a black economy; people have relationships on both sides of the border—from marriage to trade including flourishing informal and formal economies."

I first heard of Ashraf in 2015 when an editor at *Dawn* suggested contacting him for information on the politics of militarised tribal regions. Between 2007 and 2009, Ashraf reported from Swat for Dawn News and for *The New York Times* where he co-produced a documentary on the closure of girls' schools in Swat. This was where a high school student spoke on camera in 2009 when the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) had overrun the Swat Valley. The student, Malala Yousafzai was ten years old in the documentary and was later shot in the head by the Taliban. After she had spoken to Ashraf, her father, Ziauddin Yousafzai, was worried for the family's safety.

After 2018, increased militarisation in KP and Balochistan not only seeped into the political economy but also resulted in the control of information with the press caught between the state and TTP. "What emerged was a chaotic situation. However, there is a method behind this chaos. If you raise questions, you are silenced and if you keep silent you are rewarded—we call it 'hush journalism'.

⁴⁶ Interview with Syed Irfan Ashraf, 2 October 2021

⁴⁷ 'The dark side of news fixing: the culture and political economy of global media in Pakistan' was published by Anthem Press in 2021.

Journalists are scared. We feel the heat, so we write sporadically to inform the mainstream,” Ashraf says. While reporting from the tribal regions has been a dangerous proposition since the advent of the war on terror in 2001 when local journalists were attacked and killed for their reporting by state and non-state actors, the situation at present is one where the press resorts to self-censorship to survive. Local journalists say they are not willing to risk their lives to investigate significant stories, such as human rights violations and missing-persons cases. The independent media in KP and Balochistan has gone underground.

The blackout: When news is killed

Given the backdrop of censorship and repression, the media in KP has almost disappeared because there is no access to information and no freedom of expression permitted, Farzana Ali, Peshawar bureau chief for Aaj TV explains.⁴⁸ Having worked in the media for over two decades, Ali has faced challenges as a news bureau chief and a Pashtun woman covering a conflict zone in a religiously conservative part of the country.

She manages a news bureau at a time when the press is struggling to report the truth. Most stories from this region are banned from coverage. For example, details of the tribal region merger cannot be discussed. Questioning whether rehabilitation, peace and security has returned to the region is considered off limits for the press. Investigating the repercussions of the TTP’s alliance with militant splinter groups and their activities in the area is a red line, say editors working in KP. According to her information, target killings have resumed in Waziristan and Bajaur, including attacks on security forces which remain unreported in the mainstream media. “We are hearing of a replay of events of 2007 when tribal elders had been killed. Our sources tell us 300 target killings have taken place, but that information is not published or aired. The government is not documenting these incidents nor permitting independent reporting,” Ali says.

Do you get phone calls to kill stories? “Of course,” she is quick to respond. In March 2021, when her bureau covered protests during which thousands of people attempted to march to the city of Bannu, demanding a probe into the death of four young men aged between 15 and 20 years who had died during interrogation by the security forces in Jani Khel (outside Bannu), she received a phone call firmly reprimanding her for running news tickers on protestors being injured in the firing. These protestors were carrying the bodies of the four young men found in a shallow grave. No other news channel did the story.⁴⁹ She was told curtly she must be aware of what to air and what stories to kill because she

⁴⁸ Interview with Farzana Ali, 28 September 2021

⁴⁹ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-pakistan-killings-protests-idUSKBN2BK0K2>.

was informed. Most editors say the identity of the caller is not always disclosed. This demonstrates how certain stories are banned outright from being reported. The fact that target killings have restarted in tribal areas and that Jani Khel is a town along the Afghanistan border that was previously a base for the Taliban and Al-Qaeda makes this a report in the public interest. Ali says it is safe to publish or discuss an official handout but not to analyse or present another viewpoint other than the state's version of events.

She came under censure for reports on the Covid-19 smart lockdown in Peshawar when a reporter from her bureau focusing on the implementation of smart lockdowns aired footage to show violations where the police were not enforcing lockdowns. She was told not to air footage to show violations. "I asked the caller whether my reporter had reported incorrectly. So, the caller responded saying that he [the reporter] should change his location. The point being to air footage only where the lockdown is enforced. My question is: why are you intervening in my work? I was told: Don't work on border issues because that is about the national interest, don't write on Waziristan without our permission that is about the national interest, don't deal with Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, because it is about national interest and I agreed. But when reporting on Covid-19 smart lockdowns, where is the national interest regarding the work of the NCOC? What are they doing?"

Because of threats from various actors, journalists report using information from military and government press releases. Ashraf argues the threat from the TTP is real though in the near future what will matter and could curb freedom of expression in this region is the promotion of militarism. "Many talk show hosts projected Afghanistan as if it were Pakistan's 'colony,' a narrative reinforced by the comments of those Pakistani journalists who went to Kabul soon after its fall to report on the Taliban's conquest of their own country," writes Ashraf for *Dawn*.⁵⁰ When journalists like Farzana Ali dare report on the real picture of displacement, hunger and hardship in Kabul, they are warned against 'controversial' reporting. She was also viciously abused and labelled anti-state on Twitter for reporting on the plight of Afghan women and their families living in makeshift tents in Kabul; and for not echoing the media bandwagon tweeting that Panjshir Valley had fallen. She takes the stresses in her stride—or at least she puts up a facade.

In 2019, when she travelled by road to Miranshah and Mirali in North Waziristan to report, she was barred from airing her final report because what she witnessed was different to what the press had been told in previous briefings. "I saw gaps in the rehabilitation process—after 400 shops were destroyed in the operation now, we see around 20 rebuilt, for example. Most businesses and homes had been razed to the ground and have not been rebuilt." Ali was told by local

⁵⁰ <https://www.dawn.com/news/1646664/militant-threat-to-media>.

people that if she was so brave, why hadn't she come to talk to them regarding their situation before the military operation. "I asked a mother living in a tent that I had heard foreign fighters had come to the area like Uzbeks and Arabs; that she had married her daughters to them in exchange for dollars. She told me she was not educated like me but was told by her husband who was informed by the state that these people were guests to be accommodated. So, relationships were formed between local families and foreign militants; they lived among us she, told me. Now she is told they are terrorists and so are her grandsons. So, what should she do now?" Years of censorship resulting in the blackout of information from the border areas — holding geopolitical significance—has not only created an atmosphere of fear among local reporters who are caught between the state and non-state actors (some have lost their lives) but has failed to bring the concerns of its citizens into the mainstream.

In Balochistan, the media is caught between state and militant actors

Reporting Balochistan is no different. "Balochistan itself is a red line. Being a journalist in this province has been very difficult. When you take an overview of the press in the province, it has been under siege for years. Though, in the past, if you were cautious, there was freedom to write to an extent," says Akbar Notezai a journalist based in Quetta.⁵¹ It has been dangerous for journalists trying to report on the province's decades long insurgency and the military's fight against it—both sides threatening the press for its reporting. In 2011, when the Balochistan High Court banned coverage of Baloch separatists, banned terror groups and nationalist groups, reprimanding journalists and newspapers for 'glorifying' the province's armed movements, many journalists had said they were sandwiched between the government and militant organisations. *Mashriq*, *Express*, *Intikhab* and *Jang*—four widely circulated Urdu-language newspapers in Balochistan—have for years been threatened by both separatist groups and the authorities.⁵² "Better we are jailed for six months than to be killed by one group or another," former president of the Quetta Press Club, journalist Shahzada Zulfiqar had told Freedom Network in 2011. Another journalist told the then Balochistan Chief Justice Qazi Faez Isa that if he loaned him his bodyguards, he would report freely.⁵³ According to a November 2017 Freedom Network report, at least 11 cases were registered against journalists for violating the ban on coverage.

"When religious extremist groups (like sectarian organisations with political wings not banned in 2015) protested outside the Quetta Press Club they would

⁵¹ Interview with Akbar Notezai, 7 October 2021

⁵² <https://rsf.org/en/news/four-newspapers-tv-news-station-accused-violating-anti-terrorism-law>.

⁵³ Conversations with reporters from Balochistan reveal the press is caught between having to appease the state and non-state actors instead of reporting fact and investigating stories independently.

want media coverage. When the press did not give them space in newspapers and on air, they would threaten us that our coffins are ready. They would call newspaper editors forcing them to publish their statements. If the editor did not publish the section that said Shias are infidels, they would get angered that it was edited out,” a journalist says. Because smaller newspapers in Balochistan like *Azadi* and *Intekhab* (with circulation in the Makran belt and Baloch areas) need advertisements to stay afloat they are forced to accept state directives. In 2019, they received no advertisements for two to three months because the government wanted them to follow the state narrative and exclude opposition political party voices. “They told the government if we only publish government related news, our circulation will go down. They resisted. HRCP supported them. Finally, advertisements were released. These were tactics used to pressure them into reporting only on the government’s version of events.” Notezai narrates. He is no stranger to intimidatory tactics himself, especially after an investigation he did into a sexual harassment at case Peshawar University where a journalism professor was allegedly implicated. His article was described as a piece of propaganda. Notezai balances his stories with versions from both sides and doesn’t tweet on politics and militancy. “I do my work cautiously and do not come into the limelight. When I did a story on the sexual abuse of underage boys in coal mines, I interviewed the boys and did not meet anyone but my sources.”

Journalists say there is a gap in regular news reporting from Balochistan because many reporters share news reports on WhatsApp groups, simply copying the shared version for their media outlet. The practice of independent reporting has altogether vanished because access to information is difficult and dangerous. How do you investigate a story in a region where journalists cannot operate freely, have limited access and where they are under constant surveillance of the security establishment, many have asked. “In Balochistan, there is no journalism, it is ‘their’ province. They have their watch on electronic media, even TV news tickers cannot run without their compliance. Many journalists don’t want to work here. The problem is any news item published needs a version from the ISPR; if a media outlet doesn’t publish the official version, then they phone and ask,” explains a reporter not wanting to be named. Financially, too, this dearth in reporting is taking its toll as journalists are opting out of the profession. “You don’t know what the red lines are today. In the Chaghai district, for example, you cannot write about the Chinese investment in a project. When you do, you get a call or the message is conveyed through friends that you are anti-state. They expect journalism must be pro-government and positive. They expect reporters to praise CM Jam Kamal and government projects, for example. I won’t get published if I write an article praising the chief minister in say *Dawn*,” says a media source requesting anonymity.

Some reporters say this region bordering with Iran and Afghanistan is rich with stories to tell. “The whole Afghanistan story is here. China is here, for example, doing multimillion dollar projects. Many work from a comfort zone [of

WhatsApp stories] because it is challenging to explore other stories. I have done about six stories from Chaman in one month for Dawn newspaper. Gwadar is another story and it is the CPEC epicentre. I did a story on water shortages in Gwadar. There are many ways to do a story in this region,” Notezai says. He talks about the ethics of journalism which is absent in Balochistan because whole a generation of younger reporters is not trained on how to cover all sides of a story so that they don’t have to face adverse consequences. Mentorship and editors being cognisant that the reporter is based in Quetta so he must work in a safe manner is essential, he says.

Dial-in news bulletins: Bringing the news to tribal regions

When Tayyab Afridi started Tribal News Network (TNN) in 2014, the idea was to promote independent journalism through ten-hourly news bulletins where they would set the agenda. Of course, there were limitations but there was commitment to report the news.⁵⁴ “Our focus was FATA and the tool used was the mobile phone. For news accessibility, a caller would ring a number to listen to the news on his phone. Callers would not pay for the call because our system would call back the number. This was funded by the German authorities. We’d get 56,000 calls on any given day—we promoted it in Bajaur, Lakki Marwat, Dera Ismail Khan. Callers would contact us more than once a day. If there was a bomb blast, we’d get many calls.” But TNN did not have a revenue model to keep this particular project running. It worked for three years alongside an FM channel network in the tribal areas where about eight radio stations would broadcast TNN’s bulletins. It is still operating and doing good journalism. The best part of TNN’s achievements is it is gender-inclusive—and the women journalists on board are beyond-brilliant reporters, like the indomitable Razia Mehsud from South Waziristan. She has managed to irk certain quarters who interrogated her after her reporting on landmine victims and other sensitive issues such as the need for socioeconomic development and youth demands in Waziristan.⁵⁵ Often she is the only woman in all-male conferences. Some even inquired whether ‘Razia’ was a pseudonym.

In 2018, TNN received threats on Facebook in the form of direct messages when the local TTP *amir* (chief) identified himself accusing the organisation of unbalanced reporting, of siding with the government and military, and warning of consequences. “We were not balanced in our reporting according to them. It is a complex situation where nothing is black and white,” Afridi says. Again, they must work around red lines—the PTM and human rights violations are no-go subjects that cannot be analysed from a security point of view. “You can report an incident but the how and why of what happened means a grey area and there’s a red line in there. Solid evidence is important as a journalist. We are

⁵⁴ Interview with Tayyab Afridi, 13 October 2021

⁵⁵ Interview with Razia Mehsud, 20 October 2021

often told we do not carry out balanced reporting about the PTM. But the mainstream media in the country is banned from covering it so how can we be accused of not doing balanced reporting” Afridi says.

Conclusion

It is important to contextualise media freedom in relation to the government's commitment to respecting press freedom. In 2013, Pakistan ranked 159th out of 180 countries in the World Press Freedom Index by Reporters Without Borders; in 2021 it is listed as 145th showing where this government is headed with regard to press freedom. And never in the history of this country has a prime minister been declared a press freedom predator by a global media rights group. While this report documents challenges to freedom of expression, it is by no means a comprehensive study.

This report was researched and produced over the late summer and autumn of 2021 just as the government increased its assault on the independent media. It finds that a new generation of politicians with an intolerant and hostile approach towards the media have become adept at cracking down on the press. Consider the draconian media authority PMDA (2021) proposed by the government that was seen as 'a declaration of war against journalists.'⁵⁶ Interestingly, this government's human rights ministry was at the forefront of drafting and piloting the Protection of Journalists and Media Professionals Bill, 2021, passed by the National Assembly and Senate in November 2021.⁵⁷ As a comprehensive law if effectively implemented, it could provide an opportunity for those seeking redressal for threats and violence. It addresses the issue of impunity by proposing a seven-member commission—led by a former Supreme Court judge—with powers of investigation, prosecution and punishment. The statutory body with powers of a civil court would be duty-bound to investigate and prosecute within 14 days all forms of harassment, coercion and violence, including forced or involuntary disappearances, kidnapping, abduction. Recommendations to appoint a special independent prosecutor must be taken on board, especially if the human rights ministry is serious in its obligation to protect the constitutional rights of journalists.⁵⁸ Importantly, it stipulates that counterterrorism or national security laws shall not be used arbitrarily to detain journalists or hinder their work. To address impunity, the government must not fall short of implementation of the law.

While we wait to see the journalists' safety law being implemented, the state will go to any length to impose its own version of the truth to control public information. For that purpose, the media regulatory authority, PEMRA, is adept

⁵⁶ <https://www.dawn.com/news/1644783/unseemly-campaign>.

⁵⁷ <https://www.dawn.com/news/1657054/a-win-for-journalists>.

⁵⁸ <https://www.dawn.com/news/1536937>.

at issuing arbitrary instructions to TV channels from matters political to public morality.⁵⁹

In the face of unprecedented pressure from various quarters, there is dire need for the media industry to self-regulate and fact-check rigorously. The onus also falls on media owners to unite against the mounting censorship and harassment, and to formulate a code of conduct to self-regulate and ensure responsible reporting. Addressing the combination of polarisation and technological change that have facilitated the spread of misogyny, hate speech, unverified information and disinformation within the industry is a challenge which is necessary to tackle. In an environment of hostility where journalists face physical and verbal attacks that affect their ability to report news to the public the need of the hour is solidarity and responsible reporting. “With unity, no government is able to intervene with tools like PMDA to silence the media. There is no unity because many media outlet owners only want control, money and power that is why the state will divide and rule,” says Farzana Ali.⁶⁰ Interestingly the government’s proposal for a media authority united many across the media industry for the first time in over a decade.

⁵⁹ It was tasked with issuing broadcast licenses for radio and television channels. In June 2007, amendments empowered the body to revoke licenses, suspend broadcasts, confiscate equipment, and seal the premises of media outlets. Media outrage prompted Musharraf to promise to withdraw them on the condition that the media develop a code of conduct. In late 2007, ordinances passed as part of the November 3 imposition of martial law barred the media from publishing or broadcasting ‘anything which defames or brings into ridicule the head of state, or members of the armed forces, or executive, legislative or judicial organs of the state,’ and any broadcasts deemed to be ‘false or baseless.’

⁶⁰ Interview with Farzana Ali, 28 September 2021

Recommendations for press freedom and safety

This report offers recommendations below to improve the safety of journalists and preserve freedom of expression.

For the government

1. Condemn press freedom violations openly.
2. Swiftly enact and implement legislation to safeguard journalists and end impunity for attacks against the media online and offline.
3. Strongly condemn the use of online trolling to ensure digital safety.
4. Take strong and immediate action against any violations of media freedom to reduce impunity.
5. Allow access to the news media into regions of Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.
6. Communicate with media bodies, media outlets and editors to bolster press freedom.
7. Keep PEMRA from arbitrarily censoring information and TV content.
8. Stand up for the values of a free press by adhering to the UN Plan of Action of the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity.

For media outlets

1. Strengthen and commit to safety and security protocols for journalists and media workers.
2. Train desk editors and news editors to develop self-regulatory measures to improve accuracy and fairness, including practices on reporting safely and responsibly.
3. Ensure your workplace including the newsroom is secure and safe for women journalists and minorities.
4. Establish informal in-house mentorship guidance programmes.
5. Ensure that the mental health and well-being of staff is priority.

For the state

1. Refrain from arbitrarily stifling freedom of information and access to information.
2. Allow access to information.
3. Ensure actions of the state do not support or excuse violations of freedom of press.

For media regulatory bodies

1. Ensure media safety and security through unity: Ensure there is greater solidarity and understanding of a common mission among various media bodies such as PFUJ, CPNE and others.
2. Ensure equal gender representation for media regulatory bodies. Ensure women are appointed onto committees of media regulatory bodies as decision-makers.
3. Fight censorship using fact and data.
4. Ensure the appointment of a special prosecutor to investigate media attacks.
5. Ensure media houses receive their advertisement dues.
6. Ensure media owners pay staff on time and regularly.
7. Ensure a fund is created through media house contributions for journalists needing financial help in the event of job losses or threats taking them underground.

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