

Closure of Dera Ghazi Khan press club by district administration

An HRCP fact-finding report



Human Rights Commission of Pakistan



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Introduction

This mission was conducted by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) in response to a written complaint from the president of the Dera Ghazi Khan district press club, Sher Afgan Buzdar, who alleged that the commissioner of Dera Ghazi Khan had overstepped his powers and illegally sealed the press club on 2 June 2024. HRCP was concerned that such an order not only infringed on media freedom but also violated people's right to freedom of expression under Article 19 of the Constitution. Accordingly, a fact-finding mission comprising Lubna Nadeem (Council member), Muhammad Saleem (local human rights defender) and Faisal Tangwani (HRCP staff member) visited the site to ascertain the facts.

Visit to Dera Ghazi Khan press club

On 10 October 2024, the HRCP mission visited the Dera Ghazi Khan press club. The press club building and adjacent four shops—said to be owned by the press club—were sealed. During this visit, the mission met the press club president, Sher Afgan Buzdar, along with other members, including Tariq Hussain Wadani, Amin Khaloor, Bashir Ahmad, Bakht Khosa, Abid Hussain Buzdar, Shehzad Khan, Muhammad Ali Mirani, Hasnain Sheikh, Muhammad Aslam, Asghar Hussain, Ghazanfar, Muhammad Ahmed, Khadim Hussain, Afzal, Muhammad Asif, Ghulam Mustafa and Faisal Shahzad.

Meeting with press club president

Sher Afgan Buzdar informed the team that in 1970, the provincial government had allocated 11 *marlas* of land to this press club. On 26 April 2024, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) leader Malik Iqbal Saqib came to the press club to hold a press conference with other party leaders. Buzdar was not present at the time. There was heavy police presence outside the press club building. As soon as the press conference started, the police entered the building and arrested all the political workers present.

This 'illegal action' of the police was communicated to Buzdar on the telephone, following which he and his colleagues announced a protest against the police. On 28 April 2024, Buzdar and the press club general secretary, Bashir Ahmed, were detained by the deputy commissioner and sent to the police lockup for one day under the Punjab Maintenance of Public Order Ordinance 1960. During this time, claimed Buzdar, they were subjected to torture for 'three hours.' Subsequently, they were kept in custody at the district jail for 15 days.

Buzdar also said that former caretaker chief minister Mohsin Naqvi had (while in office) invited the then newly elected press club office bearers to the Chief Minister's House in Lahore and presented them with a cheque for PKR 5 million for maintenance purposes (Annex 1). However, on 23 May 2024, he claimed, the deputy commissioner wrote to the director general of public relations, asking him to intervene in the affairs of the press club and hold fresh elections. The latter replied to say that the Punjab government had no authority to interfere in the affairs of the press club, adding that any problems between member journalists should be resolved among themselves in accordance with the press club's constitution.



Press club office bearers receiving a cheque from the then caretaker chief minister

Meeting with press club employee

Muhammad Ashraf, who has worked at the press club since 1985, told the mission that the Punjab government at the time had allotted 11 *marlas* of land to the press club in 1970 (thereby confirming Buzdar's report). He said there was a record of this with the revenue department and therefore, the press club did not have unlawful possession of the land on which it was built. He also produced a *patwari's* report to the mission, dated 1 June 2024 (submitted to the commissioner), which clearly mentioned the allotment of land to the press club.

Meeting with tenants of shops owned by press club

The mission interviewed two tenants, Muhammad Shamim and Muhammad Nawaz, who were renting the adjacent shops owned by the press club.

Shamim said that he had rented his shop, a newspaper agency, for the last five years, for which he paid the press club PKR 22,000 per month. On 2 June 2024, when the press club was sealed, his shop was sealed as well; his inventory had thus been inaccessible for the last five months.

Nawaz told the mission that he ran a mobile phone business, which had also been sealed. He said that the police had filed a false case against him (FIR 198/2024 under the Punjab Local Government Act 2022 on charges of municipal offences). This was verified by the mission (Annex 2).

Meeting with press club senior vice-president

Press club senior vice-president Ghani Khosa told the mission that he had been elected an office bearer in 2023. When the president and general secretary were arrested in April 2024, he, along with the local journalist community, met the commissioner of Dera Ghazi Khan to persuade him to release their colleagues and have the press club unsealed. However, the commissioner had told



them that two senior press club members, Sajjad Ahmed Chunoon and Asadullah Dawoodi, had sent him an application stating that the press club was occupied by ‘miscreants’ who were using it for ‘political and anti-state’ activities—which was why the club had been sealed.

According to Khosa, the commissioner also said that if the press club members did not issue a schedule for a fresh election or declare that they would not allow PTI members to hold a press conference there in future, the press club would not be unsealed. Khosa informed the mission that the results of the October 2023 press club election had been accepted by all press club members and the losing side had not challenged the results at any forum.

Meeting with president of Anjuman Sahafyian-e Dera Ghazi Khan

The president of the Anjuman Sahafyian-e Dera Ghazi Khan, Mustafa Lashari, told the mission that he worked as a crime reporter at the daily *Ausaf*. Lashari was present at the press club on 26 April 2024 when the police arrested PTI leaders onsite and confirmed that local journalists had protested against the police action, leading to the arrest of the president and general secretary. The police had then sealed the press club, he said, on the pretext that it was illegally occupying land owned by the provincial government. Lashari also said that a civil suit had been filed against the Metropolitan Corporation for unsealing the press club, in which the plaintiffs had held that the district government had no authority to seal the press club.¹

Meeting with Dera Ghazi Khan commissioner

The mission visited the commissioner, Nasir Bashir, who remarked that instead of ‘complaining’ about human rights violations in Dera Ghazi Khan, the mission should ‘go to Gaza’ where worse rights violations were taking place. He said that the press club had been sealed for several reasons, one being that the Punjab government was conducting an operation against illegal occupants. However, he did not produce any written proof of this to the mission.

The team told the commissioner that according to the revenue records, 11 *marlas* of land had been allotted to the press club. He replied that this was a ‘fake and bogus’ allotment. Senior members of the press club had filed an application with him against the newly elected body on 18 May 2024, he said, alleging that the press club was being used for ‘political purposes and anti-state activities.’ The application had been filed by senior journalists Sajjad Ahmed Chunoon and Asadullah Dawoodi. He also said that if the press club members were to sit together, resolve their grievances and announce a fresh election schedule, then the press club would be unsealed. He advised the mission to meet the journalists who had filed the application and document their position.

Meetings with journalists who filed application against press club

When the mission attempted to contact Sajjad Ahmed Chunoon, he told them that he was out of town. The team then reached out to Asadullah Dawoodi and met him at his office on Kutchery Road in Dera Ghazi Khan. Speaking to the mission, he said that the closure of the press club was a matter of concern. He clarified that the press club had not occupied any government land illegally. Rather, the land had been allotted to the press club by the Punjab government.

Dawoodi confirmed that he and Sajjad Ahmed Chunoon had filed an application with the commissioner on 18 May 2024, alleging that the press club was being used for ‘political purposes and anti-state activities.’ The application also claimed that the rent accruing from the shops owned by the press club was being embezzled by ‘miscreants’ and the ‘illegal’ elected body and was not being deposited in the press club’s bank account. He said he had requested the commissioner to

¹ The mission learnt that a hearing had been fixed for 22 October 2024 but was adjourned to 5 November 2024.



ensure that the district administration should prepare a new list of voters and hold fresh elections under its supervision.

He informed the mission that he had filed a lawsuit against the chief officer of the municipal corporation and other journalists in Dera Ghazi Khan in the court of the senior civil judge, praying that the press club should remain sealed. The chief officer had appeared before the court on behalf of the district government on 13 June 2024 and stated that it had no intention of unsealing the press club. Dawoodi also said that before the mission's arrival, he had received a call from the commissioner's office, advising him to resolve his grievances with the other journalists.

Observations

Based on the evidence, the mission believes that the primary reason the Dera Ghazi Khan press club was sealed was to prevent PTI leaders from holding a press conference on the premises. The fact that the commissioner referred to the press club's land allotment as 'fake' seems to imply unwarranted interference by the local administration in the press club's affairs.² This is also borne out by the letter from the deputy commissioner to the director general of public relations, asking him to issue a fresh election schedule for the press club—a task that falls outside the latter's mandate and which he thus refused to do. The mission also finds it difficult to comprehend why the chief officer of the municipal corporation should have stated in court that the district administration had no intention of unsealing the press club.

Clearly, there is unresolved tension between rival groups of press club members, with a small group of journalists vying for a fresh election and thus expressing their lack of confidence in the current office bearers. That said, the results of the election appear to have been recognized by all local journalists' organizations—no legal action was taken against these results. Most importantly, however, the district administration appears to be interfering in the work of the newly elected press club office bearers, which is cause for concern.

Recommendations

The mission recommends the following:

1. The press club should be unsealed immediately.
2. A transparent and independent inquiry should be conducted into why the press club was sealed in the first instance and the results made public.
3. Those responsible for lodging false cases against local journalists should be held to account.
4. The district administration must avoid any measures that infringe on press freedom and people's freedom of expression and assembly.
5. The shops owned by the press club should also be unsealed immediately. The tenants' stock should be returned, and they should be compensated for the financial loss they have borne.
6. The office bearers of the press club should make its financial affairs more transparent through an independent audit, including the expenditure of the PKR 5 million received for the maintenance and upkeep of the press club.

² A copy of the allotment record is available with the mission.



Annex 1: Cheque received by press club for PKR 5 million

BOOK No. D 05953 CHEQUE No. D 595244

Payees Account Only

OFFICE OF THE **GOVERNMENT OF THE PUNJAB**

DGPR, Punjab, Lahore. PERSONAL ASSASSIN ASSIGNMENT ACCOUNT LEDGER ACCOUNTS

Dated 11-Jan-2024 20

To THE STATE BANK OF PAKISTAN
NATIONAL BANK OF PAKISTAN
TREASURY OR SUB-TREASURY OFFICER

Pay to Press Club, Dera Ghazi Khan or order
Rupees Five Million Only

and charge the same against the account of NBP 1173857063

Rs. 5,000,000

Deputy Director Press Information
for Director General Public Relations
Government of the Punjab, Lahore.

Director General Public Relations
Government of the Punjab, Lahore.

N.B. THIS CHEQUE IS CURRENT FOR THREE MONTHS ONLY AFTER THE MONTH OF ISSUE.



Annex 2: FIR lodged against tenant of press club-owned shop

پولیس فارم نمبر: 15-24 (15)		DOK-BDV-002461: سر نمبر
ابتدائی اطلاعی رپورٹ نسبت جرم قابل دست اندازی پولیس رپورٹ شدہ زیر دفعہ 154 مجموعہ ضابطہ فوجداری		
تاریخ وقت و قوعہ: مورخہ 05.06.2024 بوقت 07:30 AM		
BDivision-6/6/2024-746	نمبر: 198/24 قاعدہ: بی اوریجن مطلع: ڈیرہ غازی خان ای ٹک نمبر: 46	
07-06-2024 07:30 AM	6 قاعدہ سے روائگی کی تاریخ بوقت	1 تاریخ وقت رپورٹ
شاہد رضوان ولد محمد رضوان، پتہ: گور چالی منزل، محلہ اکرم آباد، بلاک 18 بروغلاہ بھنگان، چیشہ: انور سمنٹ اسکیر، سیکشن کارپوریشن		2 نام و سکونت اطلاع دہندہ مستفیض
شناختی کارڈ نمبر: 033366027595-3: فون نمبر: 32102-8275046		3 مختصر کیفیت جرم (معدوہ) و سبب اگر کچھ کو مکیا ہے
بجریز:		
<u>THE PUNJAB LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 2022 - 172-2(a)</u> <u>THE PUNJAB LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 2022 - 172-2(b)</u>		
186 تہہ 353 تہہ 506/B تہہ 382 تہہ		
4 جائے وقوعہ و فاصلہ قاعدہ سے اور سمت		
5 کارروائی متعلقہ تفتیش اگر اطلاع درج کرنے میں کچھ توقف ہو او تو اس کی وجہ بیان کی جاوے		
دسپلا: محمد امین بیٹ نمبر: 73HC عہدہ: HC سٹیشن نمبر: 03366039266 (ابتدائی اطلاع چھ درج کریں)		
<p>مضمون استفسار: ذیل ہے از دفتر میو سہیل کارپوریشن ڈیرہ غازی خان پنجاب:- جناب SHO صاحب پولیس قاعدہ (بی اوریجن) ڈیرہ غازی خان نمبر: FEi-193 مورخہ 05.06.2024۔ اندراج مقدمہ پنجاب لوکل گورنمنٹ ایکٹ 2022، شیڈول 8th پارٹ 1 سیریل نمبر 2 اور پارٹ II سیریل نمبر 11, 13, 14, 18، برطانیہ زیر دفعہ سیکشن (172)(2Xb), (172)(2Xa) 382, 506B, 353, 186، تحریر خدمت ہے کہ شہر ڈیرہ غازی خان بمقام فریدی بازار روڈ پر ملکی جائیداد صوبائی حکومت جو کہ مقبوضہ میو سہیل کارپوریشن ہے جس پر ناجائز قابض نے دکان تعمیر کر کے ناجائز قبضہ کر رکھا ہے دکان کو مورخہ 02.06.2024 کو بوقت 10:00 بجے رات باوجود ڈی جناب اسٹنٹ کسٹمر صاحب، جناب چیف آفیسر صاحب اور عملہ اسٹیٹ انگریجمنٹ نے سئل کر دیا تھا کہ کوٹھس ہائے دینے کے باوجود دکان خالی نہ کی۔ مورخہ 05.06.2024 کو اپنا تک سوشل میڈیا پر ایک ویڈیو اپزل ہوئی جس میں ایک مضمون غلام مصطفیٰ لاشاری ولد شعی ابی بخش لاشاری اعلان کر رہا تھا کہ اس نے دکان کا تالا توڑ کر دی سئل کر لیا ہے جس پر میں گواہان منصور راہی اور محمد یوسف بعد انور سمنٹ اسکیر، دیگر عملہ میو سہیل کارپوریشن ریگولیشن برانچ تقریباً دوپہر کے وقت بمقام فریدی بازار چیلنج دیکھا کے تالا توڑ کر سر قہ کر لیا گیا۔ مضمون غلام مصطفیٰ لاشاری بعد چند ماہ معلوم افراد جن کو سامنے آنے پر شناخت کر سکتے ہیں مذکورہ مضمون اور اس کے ہمراہیان نے مستفیض کو اسطرح کا خوف دلا کہ گواہان کے سامنے سرکاری ریکارڈ از قسم فائل رجسٹر اور سرکاری ڈائری بھی ساتھ لے گئے اور زور دیا کہ کبھی جملہ مضمون نے سرکاری اہلکاران کی کار سرکام میں مداخلت کی اور ملازمین پر حملہ آور ہوئے اور اسطرح کا خوف دلا کہ جان سے مار دینے کی دھمکیاں دیں۔ جناب والد سے استدعا ہے کہ ناجائز قابضین کے خلاف قانونی کارروائی عمل میں لاکر FIR کا اندراج کر کے نقل ادارہ ہذا کو فراہم کی جائے۔ مضمون نمبر 1۔ غلام مصطفیٰ ولد شعی ابی بخش قوم لاشاری، فریدی بازار ڈیرہ غازی خان مضمون نمبر 2۔ محمد سجاد لاشاری ولد غلام فریدی بازار ڈیرہ غازی خان مضمون نمبر 3۔ عیسا ولد نامعلوم ناجائز قابض، فریدی بازار ڈیرہ غازی خان مضمون نمبر 4۔ محمد نواز ولد نامعلوم، ناجائز قابض، فریدی بازار ڈیرہ غازی خان مضمون نمبر 5۔ 2/3 نامعلوم افراد، فریدی بازار ڈیرہ غازی خان گواہ نمبر 1۔ منصور راہی انور سمنٹ اسکیر، ریگولیشن برانچ MC گواہ نمبر 2۔ محمد یوسف ولد غلام حیدر، ریگولیشن برانچ MC دسپلا انگریزی شاہد رضوان انور سمنٹ اسکیر میو سہیل کارپوریشن ڈیرہ غازی خان از قاعدہ اس وقت ایک تحریری استفسار مندرجہ مضمون عنوان بالا موصول ہوئی مضمون استفسار سے سرمدت صورت جرم پنجاب لوکل گورنمنٹ ایکٹ 2022 (172)(2Xb), (a)(2) 172-2 - 382, 506B, 353, 186 تہہ پائی جاتی ہے لہذا تقریر ہذا پر رپورٹ ابتدائی اطلاعی ہذا جرم کے نقل مکمل پولیس بمبر اور تفتیش بدست سید حامد شاہ 907/C مقبہ خادم حسین S1 ارسال ہے تحریر خلیل رحمان ڈاکر۔</p>		
محمد امین HC 06-06-2024		