



Press Freedom in Pakistan

Jan 1st, 2021- April 2022

Attacks, legislation, rhetoric and trolling
— A media under pressure

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About Us

Pakistan Press Foundation (PPF) is an independent media documentation and training centre, non-governmental organisation committed to promoting and defending freedom of expression.

PPF was established in 1967 as a non-profit organisation and continued working until 1974, when it had to suspend operations due to the political environment then prevailing in the country. It was reactivated in 1992, and has since been involved in assisting the development of independent media in Pakistan by conducting training programs for journalists, carrying out projects in research and documentation and campaigning to defend and promote freedom of the press.

The aim of PPF is to establish an effective network of media and journalists throughout Pakistan to gather and document information concerning violations against the press in order to monitor and defend freedom of expression.

PPF has helped to raise the standard of journalism in Pakistan and to promote and defend freedom of expression in Pakistan and internationally through the media, greater awareness of social and development issues and to encourage research on mass communication in Pakistan.

PPF organises media training programs and seminars in rural centres as well as in the cities on issues faced by Pakistani media. The organisation has worked for the improvement of professional skills, and in helping to raise journalists' awareness on professional, social, political and human-rights issues as well as those related to the environment.

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Executive Summary

In Pakistan, press freedom remains under attack. While freedom of expression is a constitutionally guaranteed right in the country, through either targeted attacks or coercive methods, the space for free expression continues to shrink.

Over the 2021-22 period, the media has come under attack from all fronts.

A heavy push to legislate and increase the laws that set guidelines on content considered acceptable, the registration of cases against journalists, the continuation of the physical assault and harassment of journalists, the online trends and threats journalists particularly women journalists are subjected to were coupled with a narrative from the government that labelled members of the media in a way that undermined their credibility. With court rulings overturning overreach by state bodies as well as with the passage of two laws for journalists' safety, Pakistan saw some measures to reverse course on restrictions and to address the culture of impunity that surrounds crimes against journalists.

During the past year, the media in Pakistan continued to face what have now become more conventional forms of attacking journalists such as physical attacks, arrests and threats.

This included at least **one** instance where a media professional was killed in what appeared to be a targeted attack due to his work. Other forms of physical violence including manhandling, injuring, raiding offices and homes, kidnappings and abductions have also continued in the past year.

PPF has recorded at least **2** abductions/kidnappings, **41** instances of physical assault, **13** detentions/arrests, **23** instances of threats being issued and **7** instances where cases were registered against media professionals or they were taken to court.

During 2021, Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) former chairman Absar Alam was shot on April 20 as he was taking an evening stroll near his house in Islamabad. A month later, journalist and blogger Asad Ali Toor was attacked by three unidentified individuals at his apartment in the federal capital.

A worrying trend that we have observed in recent years is picking up and temporarily abducting media professionals. These abductions are often later said to be on the basis of social media posts by the journalists.

Senior journalist and columnist for daily *Express* Waris Raza was detained for hours on September 22 by "law enforcement agencies". Raza said that during the time that he was detained, he was asked about his Facebook posts and columns for *Express*.

With the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) in cahoots, cases have been registered against journalists and raids at their residences have also been carried out.

On Feb 16, 2022, an unauthorised raid was conducted by officials of the FIA at the house of editor and analyst Mohsin Baig in Islamabad. He was subsequently arrested but provided relief by the Islamabad High Court (IHC).

Alongside this, in 2021-22, as observed in recent years, journalists have often come under attack online. There has also been an increased focus on legislation to criminalise and regulate content as well to target journalists through cases based on their content. When these attacks

are launched particularly against women journalists, they tend to launch personal attacks that result in the character assassination of the media.

In October 2021, after journalist Asma Shirazi wrote a column for *BBC Urdu*, PTI supporters and ministers started to criticise her for doing so. This included [tweets](#) being shared by the party's official Twitter account. A special assistant to the premier also held a press conference criticising Shirazi. The ruling party also took this occasion to initiate an online campaign with the hashtag '[#QuestioningIsNotHarassment](#)'.

A video of former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif on the phone with Shirazi was circulated on Twitter with the PTI's official account [sharing it](#) and asking: "Dear Asma Shirazi, how do you explain this much obedience to a Certified Chor and Absconder?"

In response, *Aaj News* Group Chief Shahab Zuberi [clarified](#) that Shirazi was on official assignment to cover the tour on behalf of *Aaj TV*.

Video sharing app, TikTok, was subject to constant blocks throughout 2021. On the basis of court orders, the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) would temporarily block the app. In November, the social media application was finally restored.

This hyper active use of the state bodies to take legal action against journalists was not restricted to just the FIA.

PEMRA continued its operations, issuing directives and show-cause notices to media networks on the basis of content they published. The regulatory body appeared to be working beyond its mandate to regulate content by instead restricting entire topics from being covered by the broadcast media.

While PEMRA is required to regulate content, during the past year, it has blocked content on a range of topics that have not only made it harder for journalists to do their job but deprive the public of essential information.

In the past year, there has been a focus on legislation that would tighten the screws around free expression. By bringing legislation that increases the monitoring and criminalization of content online, the space for free expression will in turn shrink.

This is a strategy that in particular has been adopted by the recently ousted Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI) government, while they were at the helm of the federal government.

Under the PTI-led government, various efforts were made to increase the criminalization of content particularly online through legislation that restricts the space for free expression. Existing legislation was made further draconian and new laws were proposed.

This came in the form of a super media regulator, the Pakistan Media Development Authority (PMDA). It sought to centralise all media regulatory structures in Pakistan and create a 'converged' regulatory authority. After her appointment as the information minister under the newly formed government following the ouster of Imran Khan, Marriyum Aurangzeb on April 19, 2022, announced that the PMDA would be disbanded.

On October 13, 2021, the government notified the Removal and Blocking of Unlawful Online Content (Procedure, Oversight and Safeguards) Rules, 2021. This came after the federal cabinet had approved amendments to the rules that were first introduced in 2020.

The approval of rules to regulate online content act as a red flag for journalists who use these platforms to disseminate news, engage with audiences and for news outlets who use these platforms for engagement and circulation of news.

Perhaps the most alarming development was the push to further strengthen the already draconian Pakistan Electronic Crimes Act, 2016.

On February 20, 2022, President Arif Alvi promulgated the Pakistan Electronic Crimes (Amendment) Ordinance, 2022 to amend PECA. The IHC in April declared that the ordinance and its promulgation were "unconstitutional, invalid beyond reasonable doubt" and therefore struck it down.

This is a big step to overturn a move that had further empowered the PECA, 2016 and made crimes charged under this a non-bailable offence. The decision to pass the changes to PECA through a presidential ordinance, thus bypassing all debate, criticism and input from media stakeholders, was an alarming step taken by the former government.

A breath of fresh air during the past year was the successful passage of journalists' safety legislation both nationally and at the provincial level in the Sindh province. In May 2021, the Sindh-level legislation became the first law in Pakistan that specifically focused on the safety and protection of journalists and media professionals. The federal level bill became law soon after in November 2021.

The passage of these safety bills, is a landmark step in achieving media safety and ensuring that the culture of impunity that pervades attacks on journalists in Pakistan is addressed. Impunity in crimes against the media allow perpetrators to continue to attack, oppress and threaten journalists without any repercussions. Having strong safety laws ensure that this does not happen.

These laws must however be brought into effect. For both the laws, an active commission is yet to be formed. The federal law must also account for shortfalls in the legislation itself by drafting the rules and regulations in consultation with media bodies and other stakeholders.

Under the PTI-led government, journalists became the target of senior political leadership. Imran Khan, as prime minister, himself referred to journalists as mafias and blackmailers without any evidence to back such claims up. Such claims are a way of undermining the credibility of journalists and place a strong label on their heads. It is worrying to see that the country's senior most leadership can make such unsubstantiated claims against members of the media who they disagree with or who are critical of them.

Since Khan's ouster, the new coalition government led by the PML-N, has announced many steps they will take to address the issues of the media. This is a positive step to see the top leadership approaching the media without hostility. Their implementation of this policy will be closely observed by media and rights bodies in order to ensure they stay true to their promises instead of reversing course.

Despite PEMRA and PTA denying that they blocked the network, there have been complaints that *ARY News* has been under pressure since Khan's ouster. As with Khan's administration, it is incumbent upon the new government to ensure that media freedom is not conditional, and extends to all journalists and media professionals.

Murder of journalists

In 2021-22, PPF has recorded **one** instance where a media professional was killed in what appeared to be a targeted attack due to his work.

PPF's list of media professionals killed consists of those who were killed in the line of duty. We investigate every incident where a journalist or media professional is killed in order to find out what happened and why a journalist was targeted for their work. We also continue to follow up after a murder of the media professional takes place to track progress on investigations.

While there is one confirmed murder related to the work of a media professional, at least two other cases remain under investigation.

On November 8, a social media activist and *Sada-e-Malakand* sub editor Muhammad Zada Agra was shot dead in the Malakand district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

According to [Dawn](#), Agra, who was also the former district president of the student wing for PTI, was shot near his house in Sakhakot, Malakand, by two unidentified gunmen on a motorcycle.

A day later, the deputy commissioner and assistant commissioner of the Malakand district were suspended.

Senior journalist and former president of the Swat Press Club Shehzad Alam told PPF that Zada was very active on social media. He used to post about the illegal activities of Malakand on his

Facebook account. Recently, a video of his speech against drug smugglers in a meeting had gone viral in which he appeared very passionate to solve the problems of the area.

Condemning the murder, *Sada-e-Malakand* Editor Gohar Rehman called it an act against freedom of expression.

Physical Assault

In its annual country report on human rights for Pakistan, the US State Department [stated](#) that in 2021 there were “serious restrictions on free expression and media including violence against journalists, unjustified arrests and disappearance of journalists, censorship and criminal defamation laws, serious restrictions on internet freedom including site blocking.”

Physical assault includes a range of abuses perpetrated against the media where they are physically harmed or targeted in connection with their work. PPF has documented armed attacks, torture, manhandling and altercations with journalists. The killing, detention, kidnapping and raids on journalists' workplaces or homes are documented as separate categories.

PPF has recorded at least **41** instances of physical attacks on journalists and media professionals. The armed attacks, manhandling and misbehaviour against journalists have been perpetrated by lawyers, police, political party members and others.

Former Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) chairman Absar Alam was shot on April 20, 2021 as he was taking an evening stroll near his house in Islamabad. An unidentified man jumped over the fence of the park, fired at Alam and escaped. A [case](#) was registered.

Alam was rushed to the hospital by his friends. Although injured, Alam recorded a video on the way to the hospital in which he said he had been struck on his ribs. In a note of defiance Alam declared: “My message to those who did this is that I am not going to be scared by such tactics.”

Just a month later, on May 26, journalist and blogger Asad Ali Toor was attacked by three unidentified individuals at his apartment in the federal capital.

On Feb 15, 2022, *ARY News* host and journalist Iqrarul Hassan and his team were subjected to an attack by Intelligence Bureau (IB) officials after they had found an official “taking money during door to door NADRA verification in a sting operation in Karachi’s Orangi area,” *ARY News* [reported](#).

According to Hassan, his team and he were “stripped naked, beaten up and electric shocks were inflicted on delicate parts of their bodies on the orders of Director IB Syed Rizwan”.

Five officials of the IB were suspended following the attack.

Following his ouster as prime minister, Imran Khan has staged rallies in different cities across the country. In two rallies — one in Peshawar and one in Karachi — the media became the [target](#) of violence.

On April 13, seven reporters and camera persons received minor injuries at a PTI rally in Peshawar. According to [Dawn](#), Capital City Police Officer Ijaz Khan has taken notice of the incident and said that the police are working on identification of the attackers.

In a subsequent rally held in Karachi on April 16, once again journalists were targeted. *Samaa TV* reporter Zamzam Saeed and his cameraperson Shahid Baloch were abused and bottles were thrown at them. Additionally, the media teams for *24 News* and *Geo* were also targeted. In a subsequent rally in Lahore, a *92 News* Khawar Mughal reporter was [attacked](#).

Abduction and kidnapping

There have been at least **two** instances where journalists were abducted or kidnapped.

On Feb 18 2021, *Associated Press of Pakistan* and *Daily Islam* correspondent Saifullah Jan was kidnapped and taken to a local PTI office in Charsadda where he was subjected to torture. According to [The News](#), Jan was “allegedly tortured and humiliated” while it was recorded.

In conversation with PPF, Jan said that he had been tortured by the PTI workers earlier as well on January 15 and had submitted an application in the police station. When the police filed the criminal complaint after an early investigation, they attacked him again.

As per the police, the accused were arrested and a challan was presented against them. They are now on bail and the case is at the district court in Charsadda.

Raids and attacks

During this time period, there have been at least **two** instances where the homes of media professionals were raided. In two other instances, press clubs were raided.

On Feb 16, 2022, an unauthorised [raid](#) was conducted by officials of the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) at the house of editor and analyst Mohsin Baig in Islamabad. According to *Dawn*, the FIA arrested him after he “allegedly shot at and roughed up members of the raiding team”.

Quoting an FIA press release, the report added that as per the investigative agency, the raid had been conducted after a “search and seizure warrant” had been received by the court. The press release added that Baig and his sons and servants had fired at the FIA team and held them hostage.

They said the raid had been conducted on the complaint of a federal minister at the time, Murad Saaed. Baig had been part of an episode of *NewsOne* show G for Gharidah on February 11 where he had made a remark regarding the federal minister. PEMRA had issued a show-cause notice to the network.

Meanwhile, a petition was moved on Baig’s behalf at a sessions court. As per the sessions court, the raid was “illegal”. Baig was granted post-arrest bail by an anti-terrorism court on March 14.

Following the ouster of Imran Khan, the outgoing ruling party said the home of the former premier’s digital focal person, Dr Arslan Khalid, was [raided](#) and electronic devices were seized on April 10 in Lahore.

“He has never abused anyone on social media and never attacked any institutions,” the party said, urging the FIA to look into the matter.

PTI leader Shahbaz Gill said they were expecting “they” would do this, without naming who, and therefore the night prior, Gill had spoken to Khalid and sent him from his house to another place. Gill added that the laptops and phones that had been taken contained nothing but professional work on them.

On April 13, Khalid [tweeted](#) that he was safely back home.

On July 27, 2021, the Pakistan Rangers, a federal paramilitary force operational in the Sindh province, entered the premises of the Karachi Press Club (KPC), an act that was condemned by the governing body of the city’s press club.

During a press conference by the transgender community alliance, on October 12, DSP cantonment Ihsan Shah [entered](#) the Peshawar Press Club and tried to stop the speakers.

Detentions and Arrests

PPF has recorded at least **13** instances where media professionals were detained or arrested during the 2021-22 period.

In August, two journalists — Amir Mir and Imran Shafqat — were arrested by the FIA in Lahore.

According to a press release issued by the FIA, the two journalists were arrested on the basis of a First Information Report (FIR), registered against them for ridiculing judiciary judges, Pakistan Army and women.

While the FIA is a body tasked with investigations, it can not misuse its authority to intimidate journalists. The decision to arrest Shafqat and Mir without a trial, based on a criminal complaint, was an overreach of their authority.

The very next month, senior journalist and columnist for daily *Express* Waris Raza was [detained](#) for hours on September 22 by “law enforcement agencies”.

Speaking to PPF, Raza said that some officials in Rangers uniforms and some in civilian dress came to his house in four vehicles at around 2:30am. He said that first they took his wallet and mobile phone and confirmed his identity. He was then taken to an unknown location where was kept blindfolded.

Raza said that during the time that he was detained, he was asked about his Facebook posts and columns for *Express*.

In 2022, Mohsin Baig was arrested following a raid at his house. He was subsequently granted post-arrest bail.

Threats

During 2021-22, PPF recorded at least **23** instances where members of the media fraternity were issued threats in connection to their work.

Prior to an act of violence taking place, journalists and media professionals are often intimidated via threats. These threats can be both in person, over means of communication and online. Threats to one’s life or well being of family members can lead to self censorship and create an air of fear around media workers who are unable to do their work without thinking of the consequences.

Case registration and legal action

A tool that has been used in recent years to suppress free speech is the registration of cases against members of the media or to take legal action against them. There have been at least **seven** instances during the past year, where journalists have been taken to court or had cases registered against them in connection to their work.

In August, Amir Mir and Imran Shafqat were arrested by the FIA on the basis of a criminal complaint registered against them for ridiculing judiciary judges, Pakistan Army and women.

In February of this year, when Mohsin Baig was arrested following a raid at his residence, FIA had claimed it was conducted on the basis of a “search and seizure warrant” received by the court.

On April 8, 2022, the Islamabad High Court (IHC) dismissed the case against Baig. According to [The Express Tribune](#), the high court also dismissed cases against two other journalists — Absar Alam and Bilal Ghauri.

On March 15, 2021, police registered a case against protestors and journalists. According to the report, various activists, civil society members, individuals associated with certain political parties and others had staged a protest in front of the office of the Additional Inspector General of Police in Sukkur. The protest was held against the killing of a Sindh University student, Irfan Jatoi, in an alleged police encounter.

The case that was registered against the protestors and journalists included Section 7 of the Anti-Terrorism Act (ATA). Amongst those against whom the case was registered include: *Samaa* TV Bureau Chief Sahil Jogi, *Abtak* TV Bureau Chief Imdad Phulpoto, Daily *Puchano*’s Rustam Indhar, journalist Adam Shanbani and others.

A sessions court in Sukkur [acquitted](#) them in April 2022.

On November 15, *The News* published an investigative report by journalist Ansar Abbasi of a notarized affidavit by former Chief Justice of Gilgit Baltistan Rana Shamim that stated that he had witnessed former Chief Justice of Pakistan Mian Saqib Nisar direct a high court judge not to let former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif or PML-N leader Maryam Nawaz out on bail before the 2018 general elections “at any cost”.

Following the publication of the report, IHC Chief Justice Athar Minallah had on November 16 issued [show-cause notices](#) to Abbasi, Jang Group Editor in Chief Mir Shakilur Rahman, Editor Amir Ghauri and others, under the Contempt of Court Ordinance.

According to [Dawn](#), while the IHC indicted Shamim on January 20, 2022, they deferred the framing of charges against the media persons.

FIA overreach

In July 2021, during proceedings, the Islamabad High Court had warned the FIA to “exercise its power judiciously or else the court would impose heavy costs on the investigation officers for misuse of authority,” *Dawn* [reported](#).

The court had also [asked](#) FIA to present a report on implementation of SOPs “to stop the misuse of the cybercrime law”, adding that FIA should consult journalists’ organisations.

In 2022, with the Pakistan Electronic Crimes (Amendment) Ordinance, 2022 under discussion, the IHC [stopped](#) the FIA from making arrests under Section 20 of this ordinance. When the PECA ordinance was [struck down](#), the high court also struck down Section 20 of PECA, 2016 to the extent that the expression “or harms the reputation”.

Following this, nearly 7,000 inquiries or actions launched under Section 20 had been closed by the investigative agency, *Dawn* [reported](#).

On April 28, the IHC ordered FIA to stop harassing ARY anchorperson Arshad Sharif and other journalists after Sharif’s legal team approached the court because he was being harassed.

Restrictions online

During the past year, Pakistan saw numerous attempts to censor content online. This came in the form of proposed social media rules (read section below), harassment of journalists online and the registration of cases based on content shared online.

Pakistan also saw a countrywide blackout on social media in April 2021.

On April 16, there was a temporary blackout of social media platforms — including Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Telegram and WhatsApp — which according to the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) was “in order to maintain public order and safety”. The move had come in the midst of days of protests by the TLP. This blanket ban on social media left citizens in the dark with little information about what was happening in the country.

In the restrictions online and on social media, this year saw a constant back and forth when it came to the video sharing app, TikTok. Throughout 2021, TikTok would be banned on the basis of court orders and then restored only to be banned again. Finally on November 19, 2021, it was restored.

Women Journalists

Women journalists in Pakistan are often at the receiving end of threats, personal abuse and trolling online. Over the past year, we have observed the continuation of this trend with women anchorpersons and journalists being subjected to abuse on social media platforms. While the

media community as a whole is subjected to attacks online, the nature of the attacks against women journalists is often based on personal attacks and character assassination.

In September 2021, senior journalist and *NewsOne* anchorperson Gharidah Farooqi became the [target](#) of an online smear campaign.

According to the Coalition for Women in Journalism, after a video of Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz (PML-N) leader Mohammad Zubair was shared online, Farooqi had called for a “fair investigation into the matter and she was targetted for her principled stance”. In response, tweets against her were shared. This included videos with her face manipulated into the video with Zubair.

Farooqi [responded](#) to the attacks on her by saying: “Make as many dirty trends; Attack as much as you like. Will never deter me from my ideology, what I believe is right & from exposing minions & stooges of you-know-who.”

Another woman journalist, Benazir Shah, became the target of an online campaign the same month. This campaign was led by a member of the ruling party at the time, PTI.

According to the [CFWIJ](#), Shah was “targeted by an organised troll campaign” that had been started by then Punjab Chief Minister’s Focal Person for Digital Media Azhar Mashwani. Shah reported on the Single National Curriculum for *BBC Urdu*.

The focal person started the trend ‘[#TweetlikeBenazir](#)’ as a result of which “Shah was inundated with tweets that ranged from ridiculing her to actively threatening her”.

The CFWIJ also shared screenshots of tweets by Mashwani himself tweeting with the hashtag with comments such as “Why Human? Why not HuWoman? [#TweetlikeBenazir](#)”. He has since deleted these tweets.

In another instance, on July 21, Farooqi had posted a tweet regarding animal sacrifice on Eid-ul-Azha in which she [wrote](#): “Spare an animal’s life if you can. Embrace the philosophy behind the incident and the divine message, in your life. This day is not to mark meat eating. Love animals. Let them live. Eid Mubarak.” Following her tweet, the hashtag ‘[#ShameonGharidahFarooqi](#)’ started trending on Twitter.

In October 2021, after journalist Asma Shirazi wrote a column for *BBC Urdu*, PTI supporters and ministers started to criticise her for doing so. This included [tweets](#) being shared by the party’s official Twitter account. A special assistant to the premier also held a press conference criticising Shiraz. The ruling party also took this occasion to initiate an online campaign with the hashtag ‘[#QuestioningIsNotHarassment](#)’.

A video of former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif on the phone with Shirazi was circulated on Twitter with the PTI's official account [sharing it](#) and asking: "Dear Asma Shirazi, how do you explain this much obedience to a Certified Chor and Absconder?"

In response, *Aaj News* Group Chief Shahab Zuberi [clarified](#) that Shirazi was on official assignment to cover the tour on behalf of *Aaj TV*.

In April, analyst Reema Omer had commented on the violent attack against the deputy speaker of Punjab Assembly during a session to elect a new provincial chief minister. In a tweet, Omer said: "PTI leaders incited and threatened violence against dissidents for weeks and now are openly condoning and justifying assault on Punjab's Deputy Speaker. In doing so, they are accepting PTI is a lynch mob - not a political party bound by the Constitution or the rule of law."

In response, former human rights minister Shireen Mazari said: "Your petty hatred for PTI knows no bounds! But luckily u[sic] don't speak for majority of Pakistanis, just for your foreign NGO! We have had enough of pontification and arrogance! Now go cry to your NGO."

Such reactions to a journalist, analysing a political development, are unbecoming of a senior politician. Such a response for any leader, particularly from the former human rights minister, is in bad taste and works in creating a label against a journalist and allowing the dissemination of hate against them.

During a PTI rally in Lahore, a poster held by a protester [carried](#) a threatening and lewd slogan directed at Farooqi.

The overarching rhetoric and trends against journalists online often translate into physical acts of violence or threats. This appeared to be one such instance.

Farooqi said that she has [complained](#) to the FIA in this regard.

COVID-19

The spread of COVID-19 in 2020 upended life around the world. The illness, death, lockdowns and new normal it brought with it led to a new set of challenges for the Pakistani media.

In 2020, the media were often at the frontlines reporting on the pandemic. Many journalists contracted the virus and many lost their lives to the virus. At least eight deaths of media persons due to the virus were reported.

Much of the same order of lockdowns amongst new variants of the virus continued during 2021. However, 2021 brought relief in the form of vaccination against the virus. The situation

regarding spread of COVID-19, although comparatively controlled in Pakistan from the start, also improved over the course of 2021 and as we entered 2022.

At least three deaths of journalists were reported in 2021 due to COVID-19 — Mirza Khurram Baig, Sohail Abdul Nasir and Johar Majeed.

During the past year, when it came to the coronavirus, the restrictions the media faced came during reporting of the vaccine administration process or while covering violations of standard operating procedures (SOPs) that were in place during the pandemic.

On May 18, 2021, a [case was registered](#) against six journalists by a health department officer in Umerkot when they posted on social media about vaccine shortages.

On October 2, a case was registered against *Samaa TV* reporter Daniyal Umer after he reported on a fake vaccine entry made in Lahore for late first lady Kulsoom Nawaz. The Punjab government had [said](#) that it would dispose of the criminal complaint against Umer.

PEMRA in overdrive

During 2021-22, the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) has introduced a number of blanket bans that restrict the media from reporting on entire subjects.

While PEMRA is the regulatory body, completely restricting coverage of certain topics is not just an act of restricting press freedom, it is a disservice to the public, who are deprived of information on key political developments.

In October 2021, PEMRA [banned coverage](#) of the Tehreek-i-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP), a religious political party, at a time when the group was conducting protests. At such a time, providing coverage of the TLP's actions is an act of public service as they inform citizens about road closures, what areas to avoid, and how to go about their lives. However, by restricting coverage, the public had to rely on online media platforms as well as social media, which itself saw a temporary ban during these days.

Some of the orders by PEMRA appeared to be of a political nature.

In an [advice](#) dated March 24, 2021, the media regulatory body said that satellite television licensees “indulged in airing highly unsubstantiated, judgemental and unipolar remarks regarding National Accountability Bureau (NAB) and its functioning without getting official point of view of the Bureau with an alleged intent to malign the state institution”.

The notice added that this was in “absolute disregard” to earlier instructions by the Supreme Court, PEMRA's rules etc.

While PEMRA is responsible for setting rules and guidelines for the broadcast media, it can not dictate the content covered by the media. For the regulatory body to accuse TV channels of acting with an “alleged intent to malign the state institution” is a grave allegation being placed upon the media. It undermines the integrity of the media and accuses them of acting to undermine NAB. The media is not responsible for presenting a positive picture of any state body; instead it is responsible to cover all developments in a fair and accurate manner.

In another instance, PEMRA [barred](#) journalists from reporting on sources on cabinet meetings..

This year, in January, the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) [requested](#) PEMRA to stop channels from airing remarks by former FIA chairman Bashir Memon in a case involving an international fugitive.

In October 2021, PEMRA issued a directive regarding “hug/caress scenes, extramarital relations, vulgar, bold dressing, bed scenes and intimacy of married couples” in television dramas. They urged broadcasters to refrain from airing “hug/caress scenes”.

The blanket bans on content often overstep the mandate of PEMRA to regulate content and instead act as a tool of censorship restricting the media. They also act as a way to influence the nature of coverage of political and social developments in Pakistan.

In November 2021, PEMRA [directed](#) media channels to air the “political map” of Pakistan for two seconds before the 9pm bulletin on a regular basis.

PEMRA also issues show-cause notices and fines to channels on the basis of certain contents that they air.

Channels taken off-air

At the start of 2021, *Bol News* was taken off temporarily. On January 22, PEMRA suspended the licence for the TV channel for 30 days and fined them Rs1million.

According to a [press release](#), *Bol News* had “aired contemptuous remarks” against the Lahore High Court chief justice and other judges while discussing the appointment of LHC judges on a talk show.

In February 2022, News One was taken off air before a show-cause notice was issued to the channel, [Dawn](#) reported. PEMRA denied this.

In April, following the ouster of Imran Khan and during his rallies around the country, there were complaints on social media that *ARY News* had been removed off air in parts of the country.

During a meeting of a Senate standing committee, the PEMRA chairman said that they had not ordered the blockage of any channel's transmission.

The ARY spokesperson was asked to inform them where the channel had been blocked as well as the names of the cable operators, *Dawn* [reported](#).

Pakistan Media Development Authority

Under the now ousted Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI) government, there appeared to be a strong effort to control social media and to criminalise content shared on the platform.

Perhaps the most alarming development for press freedom in Pakistan came with the push to form a [super media regulator](#), the Pakistan Media Development Authority, by the recently ousted Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf government. It sought to centralise all media regulatory structures in Pakistan and create a 'converged' regulatory authority.

On August 15, then Information Minister Fawad Chaudhry said the government wanted to set up an authority for the regulation of mainstream and social media.

According to [Dawn](#), while speaking to representatives of digital media platforms, Chaudhry said: "We need to think over fake news, sectarian news and hate material. We are setting up [the] Pakistan Media Development Authority (PMDA). Digital media is our future."

According to a concept paper on the proposed ordinance, the PMDA was to be "new statutory institution established to regulate films, electronic, print and digital media in Pakistan in the age of metadata, digital and social media and internet based content and advertisements".

"The proposed institution may also appropriate all current regulatory functions with refinements for the sake of efficiency, transparency and effective regulatory oversight of media," the document stated. Additionally, it stated that the PMDA will have a "strategic purpose of making media in Pakistan's public interest".

Just days later on August 17, a joint body of media groups — All Pakistan Newspapers Society, Pakistan Broadcasters Association, Council of Pakistan Newspaper Editors, Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists and Association of Electronic Media Editors and News Directors — rejected the government's effort to set up the PMDA, [Geo](#) reported.

"All representatives were unanimous in rejecting the PMDA draft," they said in a statement while clarifying what they said was an impression by the information ministry that the media organisations were not strongly opposed to the PMDA.

“The recently circulated minutes of the meeting between the Ministry of Information & Broadcasting and these organisations are misleading and have been purportedly distorted to give the impression that there was no serious objection to PMDA,” they said.

On September 12, the media fraternity staged a [protest](#) outside Parliament House in Islamabad.

After her appointment as the information minister under the newly formed government following the ouster of Imran Khan, Marriyum Aurangzeb on April 19, 2022, announced that the PMDA “was being disbanded in whatever shape or form it was working,” *Dawn* [reported](#).

While the PMDA had not been formed or come into effect, this is a welcome step that indicates the unacceptability of such a measure under the newly formed government.

PECA empowered and then struck down

There has been an effort to further strengthen the already draconian Pakistan Electronic Crimes Act, 2016. This move would make an already highly repressive law even worse and shrink the space for free expression significantly.

On February 20, 2022, President Arif Alvi [promulgated](#) an ordinance to amend PECA. This came a day after the information minister said that the federal cabinet had [granted](#) its approval for this amendment.

The amendment included an increased jail term from three to five years to anyone “defaming any person or institution”, the definition of a person was expanded, it was made a non-bailable offence, speedy trials were urged and the court was required to submit monthly reports for pending trials.

It was rejected across the board by media bodies and was challenged in the Islamabad High Court.

Giving its ruling on April 8, the IHC declared that the Pakistan Electronic Crimes (Amendment) Ordinance, 2022 and its promulgation were “unconstitutional, invalid beyond reasonable doubt” and therefore struck it down.

In a written order from hearings against the ordinance, IHC Chief Justice Athar Minallah stated: *“Freedom of expression is a fundamental right and it reinforces all other rights guaranteed under the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, 1973 [...] Free speech protected under Article 19 and the right to receive information under Article 19-A of the Constitution are essential for development, progress and prosperity of a society and suppression thereof is unconstitutional and contrary to the democratic values.*

The criminalization of defamation, protection of individual reputations through arrest and imprisonment and the resultant chilling effect violates the letter of the Constitution and the invalidity thereof is beyond reasonable doubt.”

The IHC also struck down Section 20 of PECA, 2016 to the extent of the expression “or harms the reputation”. In February, the IHC had already prohibited the government from making arrests under this section of PECA, 2016.

Social media under control

On October 13, 2021, the government [notified](#) the Removal and Blocking of Unlawful Online Content (Procedure, Oversight and Safeguards) Rules, 2021. This came after the federal cabinet had [approved](#) amendments to the rules that were first introduced in 2020.

In November 2020, the information technology ministry notified the “Removal and Blocking of Unlawful Online Content (Procedure, Oversight and Safeguards) Rules 2020”. These rules received backlash.

According to [Dawn](#), in March 2021, then prime minister Imran Khan had formed an inter-ministerial committee to review the rules.

The approval of rules to regulate online content act as a red flag for journalists who use these platforms to disseminate news, engage with audiences and for news outlets who use these platforms for engagement and circulation of news.

Social media has so far been a relatively open media realm, however, there has been a push to create rules and set guidelines for content shared online. The fear that emerges from such rules being developed is the misapplication of the law to target journalists who share news critical of the state.

While the media must operate within professional guidelines and policies established by media outlets, government interference and policing of content on any medium can become a dangerous tool permitting censorship and legal action against the media. It is a dangerous step in the direction of controlled news content that undermines the role of the media.

A landmark year for journalists’ safety legislation

In a positive step, the past year saw landmark legislation for the safety of journalists and media professionals. Both at a provincial level in Sindh and at the federal level, governments were keen on passing legislation for media safety and successfully managed to do so.

The first ever legislation for the safety of journalists and media professionals in Pakistan came with the [passage](#) of the Sindh Protection of Journalists and Other Media Practitioners Bill 2021 in the Sindh Assembly on May 28, 2021.

The Sindh governor had initially refused to sign it after which it was passed by the provincial assembly again in June and became law.

The legislation envisages the creation of a robust, inclusive and autonomous Commission on Safety of Journalists and Other Media Professionals comprising government duty bearers as well as media stakeholders, including the Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists (PFUJ), the Council of Pakistan Newspaper Editors (CPNE), the All Pakistan Newspaper Society (APNS), the Pakistan Broadcasters Association (PBA), the Sindh Commission on Information Commission and the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP).

The Sindh level law became the first of two to be passed in Pakistan this year for the safety of journalists.

A few months later, on November 8, the National Assembly passed the Protection of Journalists and Media Professionals Bill, 2021. It had been tabled in the National Assembly in May 2021. On December 1, President Arif Alvi signed the Bill into Act.

This was an important step forward in providing journalists with safety at a national level. While the federal legislation requires further work to make it effective in actually providing safety to journalists and media professionals, passing the law can be seen as a significant first step. Both the Sindh and federal laws are yet to come into effect with the formation of the commissions. These laws can also form the basis for provincial level legislation in other provinces where no such legislation yet exists.

In February, Sindh minister Saeed Ghani had [said](#) the commission required under this law would be formed “soon”.

At the federal level, the newly formed PML-N led government has said they will form the commission required by this law “soon”.

Government rhetoric

Under the PTI government led by Imran Khan as prime minister, not only was there a push for legislation to regulate and control the media, the rhetoric promoted by Khan’s government was one of labelling the media which in turn became a seed for distrust in journalists, incites hate against them and undermines their credibility without any basis.

In an address to the nation on February 28, 2022, Khan labelled members of the media as mafia and blackmailers.

As the sitting prime minister, after addressing the draconian PECA ordinance his government had introduced, Khan went on to say that in the name of the freedom of the press, in Pakistan there were “mafias sitting here and blackmailing [us]”. Appearing to accuse the media, he said that their agendas are “something else”, adding that there are also journalists who are being paid to spread this filth and blackmail them.

This kind of hostile and accusatory rhetoric toward the media has been continued throughout the PTI’s time in power — from the push to introduce restrictions to making unsubstantiated claims against journalists — instead of working to strengthen press freedom, the PTI leadership itself undermined it.

Following Khan’s ouster, the party has held rallies across the country. These rallies have drawn big crowds, however, they have also become another [base](#) to attack the media.

On April 13, seven reporters and camera persons received minor injuries at a PTI rally in Peshawar. In a subsequent rally held in Karachi on April 16, once again journalists were targeted. *Samaa TV* reporter Zamzam Saeed and his cameraperson Shahid Baloch were abused and bottles were thrown at them. Additionally, the media teams for *24 News* and *Geo* were also targeted.

A new administration

Following the ouster of Imran Khan as prime minister, a new coalition government with the Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz (PML-N) at the helm. The policies, rhetoric and actions of the newly appointed government will be closely watched by media bodies to ensure they uphold the promises to press freedom that they have made.

Addressing her first press conference on the job, Information Minister Marriyum Aurangzeb on April 19 announced a list of steps the new government would take with regards to the media.

According to *Dawn*, the decisions regarding the media announced by Aurangzeb are:

- Disbanding the Pakistan Media Development Authority (PMDA).
- A joint action committee of stakeholders will meet to discuss issues faced by the media.
- The joint action committee will work out a “consultative solution” for laws regarding the media.
- Law Minister Azam Nazeer Tarar will review the Pakistan Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) ordinance from 2016. Stakeholders will be consulted for this.
- The issue of fake news needs to be dealt with.
- The Protection of Journalists and Media Professionals Bill 2021 will be made implementable.

- The commission for the Protection of Journalists and Media Professionals Bill 2021 will be formed “soon”.
- The new government will “do its best to undo the damage” done by the PTI government regarding censorship, laying off of journalists etc.
- Regarding social media campaigns against journalists, she said strict action will be taken against anyone who tries to “besiege” homes of journalists. The Federal Investigative Agency and police will take action.
- Will wholeheartedly accept criticism by the media.

These are positive steps that the new government hopes to take and while such policies are welcome, progress on their implementation is yet to be seen.

Following a meeting with a media joint action committee, Aurangzeb announced that they had agreed to curb fake news through a provision in the Pemra law. This step, while aiming to target fake news, can be misused to label and take legal action against the author of any item of news that is unacceptable to those in positions of power. While misinformation and disinformation are both important trends that need to be addressed, legislation that works to restrict content in any form, should be the last line of defence, not the first.

Looking ahead — an election year approaches

There remains much uncertainty about the political future of Pakistan with the province of Punjab without a chief minister for nearly a month and the ousted Khan holding rallies around the country with a push for elections to be held.

While all the developments of the recent months make it difficult to anticipate whether elections may be held early, as per the schedule elections are set to take place in 2023.

As we enter this stage of crucial importance in the country’s politics, the role of a free press is going to be critical. While the media’s coverage extends beyond politics, it is often reporting on politics, where they become subject to threats, abuse and attacks.

The media must be permitted to report on and cover political developments without being labelled for their work and without blanket bans on coverage. This freedom of broadcast without intimidation must be granted to all channels and news outlets regardless of a specific government’s opinion of a media organisation.

The government and state leadership should work toward ensuring the rights of the media instead of the opposite. Media bodies including PPF will be closely observing and holding the government to account over this period to ensure press freedom is guaranteed.

As political rallies take place now and will continue to take place till an election, it is incumbent on political parties to ensure that their rallies and political activities do not become the basis for the assault and intimidation of the media.

Media organisations should focus on ensuring that their staff is provided with the necessary safety equipment and training to cover the current political situation as well as developments that take place as we enter an election year.

Timeline

2021

- **January 12:** Daily *Metro Watch* Editor Zahid Farooq Malik was stopped, shoved by traffic police while covering government employees' protest in Islamabad.
- **January 17:** 92 News reporter Munawar Hussain and *Sindh TV* reporter Noman Memon were attacked while covering a cockfight in Mehrabpur.
- **January 18:** Geo News cameraperson Nasir Mughal was beaten by accused and their lawyers while covering Barrister Fahad Malik murder case at an anti-terrorism court in Islamabad.
- **January 21:** Geo News crime reporter Ahmed Faraz received life threats from the superintendent of police after covering news of a tweet by his wife, another superintendent.
- **January 23:** *Qaumi Lalkar* reporter Malik Ehtisham and cameraman Munawar Abbasi were detained in Bani Gali while distributing newspapers.
- **January 25:** PEMRA suspends the licence of *Bol TV* and imposes a Rs1 million fine.

- **February 8:** *Ary News* cameraperson Jahangir Baloch was attacked by lawyers protesting at the Islamabad High Court.
- **February 11:** *City 42* reporter Zain Madni Hussaini and cameraperson were manhandled by DSP while covering traffic problems in Lahore during cricket matches.
- **February 16:** *Bol News* cameraperson Muhammad Rehan was injured while covering by-elections in Karachi.
- **February 18:** *Associated Press of Pakistan* and *Daily Islam* correspondent Saifullah Jan kidnapped, tortured, and dragged to an office of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf in Charsadda.
- **February 21:** Geo and Jang Media Group offices in Karachi attacked by protesters.
- **February 23:** *Koh-e-Noor TV* reporters Muhammad Faisal Mirza and Malik Junaid were threatened after airing story regarding PTI social media activist.
- **February 23:** PEMRA sends notification to *TV One* regarding content aired in the drama *Dil Naumeed to Nahi*.
- **February 25:** Geo News cameraperson Sheraz Gardezi was threatened by Azad Kashmir's DG local government after reporting on Bagh's underdeveloped areas.

- **March 1:** PEMRA serves show-cause notices to 14 channels for airing “fake news” regarding increase in prices of petroleum products.
 - **March 2:** Five journalists — *GNN TV* Sardar Naeem Chughtai, *Dunya News* reporter Syed Taqiul Hasan, daily *Awaz* reporter Hamza Kamal, daily *Country News* reporter Siddique Loon, *YJF Web TV* reporter Nawaz Dar — were detained by Muzaffarabad police.
 - **March 8:** Two journalists — Tahir Naseer and Farhan Hussain — in Rawalpindi received a letter with a death threat for doing a show on investment companies and money changers on their YouTube channel *Watch Time*.
 - **March 11:** Case registered against journalist Ghulam Akbar Marwat in Lakki Marwat following a story on corrupt practices in the food department.
 - **March 11:** PTA blocks Tik Tok following orders of the Peshawar High Court.
 - **March 15:** Case registered against four journalists in Sukkur while covering a sit-in.
 - **March 18:** *Royal News TV* reporter Ajay Lalwani was murdered in Sukkur city of Sindh province. A First Information Report (FIR) was registered against three unknown assailants.
 - **March 19:** Police attacked the vehicle of *7 News* Director News Amir Sohail in a protest after he aired footage of a fake police encounter.
 - **March 21:** FIA summons former PEMRA chairman Absar Alam.
 - **March 24:** PEMRA advises TV channels not to air unsubstantiated remarks about the National Accountability Bureau (NAB).
 - **March 24:** *92 News* anchorperson and Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists Rana Azeem threatened by theatre actor Iftikhar Bhola following a story on the theatre industry.
 - **March 26:** Journalist Sohail Abdul Nasir dies of COVID-19.
 - **March 27:** Journalist Johar Majeed dies of COVID-19.
 - **March 29:** Inter-ministerial committee constituted by then Prime Minister Imran Khan to review social media rules.
 - **March 30:** Daily *Riyasat* and *KNN* journalist Noor Islam was arrested by Mangho Pir Police in Karachi.
 - **March 31:** Daily *Ash Sharq* crime reporter Ali Abbasi received threats to his life.
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- **April 3:** Freelance journalist Shahid Aslam detained in the office of a senior member of the board of revenue when he went to document the review of Cooperative Department Secretary Babar Hayat Tarar, who was accused of wrongdoing.
 - **April 3:** *Bol News* correspondent Kamran Minhas received minor injuries in an attack after he filed a report on the parking mafia.
 - **April 3:** *News 7* correspondent Shahid Khan was threatened verbally for his report against nurses not attending to patients in Dera Ghazi Khan district in Punjab.
 - **April 6:** *Takmeel* Editor Arsalan Haider received a call from an unknown number that threatened him for carrying a report about the Punjab Higher Education Commission in Lahore.

- **April 11:** Rawalpindi local newspaper *Daily Sarkar* Deputy Editor Saleem Bukari was issued a life threat by the in-charge of the Survey Department in Chaklala after local residents' grievances against him were published in the paper.
- **April 12:** PEMRA issues notice to *Express News* for airing irresponsible words on the programme Khabardar.
- **April 13:** 92 News correspondent Muhammad Asif beaten up by police in Multan while covering protests of the Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP).
- **April 14:** ARY News reporter Qamar Butt beaten by TLP protesters in Faisalabad during their nationwide protests.
- **April 14:** Police thrashed photojournalists Sadaqat Mughal and Amjad Hussain who were covering a police operation against the TLP.
- **April 16:** Countrywide blackout on social media as PTA temporarily blocks sites to maintain public order and safety.
- **April 16:** PEMRA bans coverage of TLP.
- **April 20:** Former Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority Chairman Absar Alam shot by an unidentified man as he was taking an evening stroll near his house in Islamabad.
- **April 24:** Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam (Fazl) supporters attack Karachi Press Club employees after they refused entry to armed guards of Maulana Umar Sadiq.
- **April 24:** NACTA says over 19,000 accounts taken down for inciting hate and spreading terrorism.
- **April 25:** Chief Municipal Officer Badin Maqsood Ahmed Mallah threatened journalist Ata Muhammad Chandio in a phone call.
- **April 28:** FIA sends notice to TV anchor Nadeem Malik in connection with information he shared on an episode of his talk show Nadeem Malik Live on *Samaa TV*.
- **April 28:** PEMRA asks TV channels to rely on information from the information minister or other cabinet members regarding decisions of cabinet meetings.
- **April 29:** Journalist Mirza Khurram Baig dies due to complications from COVID-19.
- **May 1:** TNN journalist Rafiullah assaulted by staff at Seedo Shareef Hospital in Swat where he went to cover complaints of lack of performance by staff.
- **May 18:** Case registered against six journalists — PTV correspondent Ali Murad Dal, *Daily Phenji* and *Times News* correspondent in Umerkot Awi Goswami, journalist Allah Jorio Soomro, Umerkot Press Club Secretary General Mushtaq Qumbahar, Sindh *Express News* correspondent Dilbar Bhaiya and *Mehran TV* correspondent Niaz Rajha — by a health department officer when journalists posted on social media about shortages of COVID-19 vaccines in Umerkot.
- **May 18:** PEMRA issues a show-cause notice to *Neo TV* for airing a fight on a morning show.
- **May 24:** *DawnNewsTV* correspondent Syed Wasim beaten by SHO Saudabad Rana Haseeb and other police officials in Karachi when he went to seek some information.
- **May 24:** ARY News reporter Afzal Pervez, DSNG operator Umar, cameraman Nadeem and driver Mujeeb assaulted by restaurant employees while covering COVID-19 SOP violations in Karachi.

- **May 26:** Journalist and blogger Asad Ali Toor suffers an armed attack in the capital. Toor was attacked by three unidentified individuals at his apartment in Islamabad.
 - **May 28:** *SamaaTV* cameraman manhandled by Haripur Police for filming a video of the police.
 - **May 28:** *Awaz TV* correspondent Latif Veesar, *Times News* correspondent Barkat Mirani and *Awaz TV* cameraman tortured by Mirpur Mathello Police.
 - **May 28:** Sindh Assembly passes the Sindh Protection of Journalists and Other Media Professionals Bill 2021
 - **May 30:** Daily *Samaa* Bureau Chief Raja Waheed Jangua was threatened by the Senate Housing Society Rawalpindi General Secretary Sher Ali for publishing stories of corruption against the society.
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- **June 5:** Punjab Police torture *Bol News* correspondent Ahmed Nawaz after he reported on embezzlement in government development projects and cases were rejected in Rampur, Rajanpur district.
 - **June 5:** Police try to stop journalist Ghulam Haider from coverage in the Qazi Ahmed area of Nawabshah while they were conducting an operation against *ghutka* sellers.
 - **June 17:** *Nawai-e-Waqt* correspondent Javed Siddiqui in Dera Ghazi Khan receives a threatening call from the head of the Laadi gang.
 - **June 18:** Journalist Bilal Ghauri summoned by FIA Cyber Crime Reporting Centre in Islamabad.
 - **June 27:** *24NewsHD* correspondent Sameen Nawaz and cameraman harassed by the administration of the Karachi Expo for covering the COVID-19 vaccination facilitation centre.
 - **June 28:** SHC orders PTA to block Tik Tok till July 8.
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- **July 4:** Bhong Press Club Asfghar Ali Jaffery tortured in custody by Rahim Yar Khan Police allegedly due to the pressure of a local individual of influence to arrest the journalist in a false case.
 - **July 4:** Photojournalist Sultan Bashir injured while covering a students' protest outside the Higher Education Commission in Islamabad.
 - **July 7:** Muhammad Usman of *Samaa News* and Malik Irfan of *24 News* detained by two constables and ASI of Nilore Police Station in Islamabad. Usman was injured.
 - **July 11:** *Express* newspaper correspondent Baktullah Jan Hasrat receives life threats.
 - **July 16:** *GTV News* correspondent Abdul Rehman and cameraman Ashfaq Hussain beaten up by a group of shopkeepers in Peshawar.
 - **July 17:** Daily *Chakwalian* reporter threatened by locals at "the behest of Secretary Union Council Mulhal Mughal Khadim Hussain".
 - **July 18:** Villagers threaten Mehrab Shah Afridi, a journalist from Khyber District, and attack him inside the Landi Kotal Press Club.
 - **July 19:** Shikarpur Police register a case against *Abb Tak* correspondent Sultan Raind.
 - **July 21:** TikTok blocked by PTA.

- **August 7:** YouTube channel *Googly News TV* owner Amir Mir and *Tellings with Imran Shafqat* owner Imran Shafqat arrested by the Federal Investigation Agency(FIA) cyber crime cell in Lahore.
 - **August 13:** Local police detained two camera persons — Uzman Rana and Eshlay Shafqat — after covering a protest of locals in Vehari.
 - **August 13:** *Time News* and daily *Panhanji Akhbar* journalist Ghulam Qadir Shah attacked in Sanghar, Sindh.
 - **August 20:** Web channel *Vision 47 News* journalist Muhammad Imran attacked by local businessmen Raza Ahmed Noori and Zahid Shah in Taxila at a court for posting news against saying they were involved in an illegal profit based business.
 - **August 26:** 92 News reporter Muhammad Iqbal Mengal detained by Taliban in Kabul. He was not assigned to report from Afghanistan, instead had gone by his own choice 16 days prior.
 - **August 27:** Two Pakistani journalists — *Khyber News* reporter Matin Khan and cameraperson Muhammad Ali — arrested in Kandahar, Afghanistan while reporting for the channel.
 - **August 28:** Freelance journalist Amjad Khan from Takhtbhai receives threatening voice from official of the counter terrorism department in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.
 - **August 30:** Police misbehave with *Geo News* correspondent Tariq Hassan and *BBC* correspondent Muhammad Nabeel outside Governor House in Karachi while covering a protest for missing persons.
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- **September 2:** Then focal person for Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Chief Minister MPA Muhammad Asif Khan threatens journalist Musarratullah Jan for his post about low standard of construction work in the formers' constituency.
 - **September 10:** *Sindh TV* journalist Zain Sarki tortured by Crime Investigation Agency Incharge Ali Hassan Mehar and his two personal guards while making footage of 'suspicious activities' in the CIA office.
 - **September 10:** Police in Swat district book daily *Chand* journalist Hayat Muhammad Kalami in two different cases.
 - **September 13:** Daily *Ausaf* correspondent Amjad Hussain Barcha arrested by police after he reported on the DIG allegedly harassing a female police officer at a Gilgit police training centre. Released after journalists' bodies protested; no FIR registration.
 - **September 14:** *Samaa News* journalist Manzar Shigri threatened by police after he shared a post against them on his Facebook page.
 - **September 17:** *Dunya News* journalist Saleem Mughal receives death threats from a Sukkur Electric Power Company lineman after publishing news about corruption cases by the FIA against the latter.
 - **September 20:** YouTube channel *EconomyNewz Rana Abrar Khalid* Rana Abrar Khalid says officials from the Intelligence Bureau of Pakistan asking economy journalists about him.
 - **September:** Veteran journalist Nadir Shah Adil kept captive for 18 days. Adil was told he needed to be taken to Karachi's Lyari area for COVID-19 treatment.

- **September 22:** Daily *Express* columnist Waris Raza who works on press freedom issues in Pakistan taken by law enforcement agencies' personnel from his home in Sahafi Colony in Karachi. Released in the evening.
- **September 29:** Journalist Tanveer Awan is arrested by police from Islamabad in a blasphemy case.
- **September 29:** Cabinet approves amendment to digital media rules.
- **October 2:** Case registered against *Samaa TV* reporter Daniyal Umer for reporting on a fake COVID-19 vaccine entry for late Kulsoom Nawaz in Lahore.
- **October 10:** *Metro 1*, Shahid Zehri, was killed in an explosion in the industrial area of Hub. Banned Balochistan Liberation Army claimed responsibility for the attack.
- **October 10:** *Awami Awaz* journalist Maqsood Ahmed threatened by a local land grabber after he reported on illegal land grabbing on the historical land of Bhambore in Dhabeji.
- **October 12:** Peshawar Press Club raided by DSP Cantonment Ihsan Shah to stop members of the transgender community from holding a press conference.
- **October 13:** Government notifies the Removal and Blocking of Unlawful Online Content (Procedure, Oversight and Safeguards) Rules, 2021.
- **October 20-24:** Mobile internet suspended in areas of Lahore including Samanabad and Iqbal Town on the basis of notification issued by the interior ministry.
- **October 21:** Press clubs across Pakistan ban Shahbaz's Gills entry for making "baseless allegations" against Asma Shirazi.
- **October 21:** PEMRA issues advice regarding caress/hug scenes dramas.
- **October 22:** *Aaj News* correspondent Rana Usman and *24NewsHD* correspondent Nafees Arain attacked by Islamabad Police while covering TLP protests.
- **October 28:** PEMRA bans media coverage of TLP.
- **October 28:** The chairman of the Rawalpindi Educational Board submits an application in Morgah Police Station against *Akhbar-e-Haq* chief reporter Gulzar Hussain; accuses him of "breaching secrecy".
- **October 28:** PEMRA temporarily blocks the website for *The First Media* for breaking unverified news on the closure of *Bol News*.
- **October 30:** Traffic warden Syed Noorshah threatens journalist Naseebullah after he reported on traffic problems in the area in Buner.
- **November 2:** SHO registers FIR against daily *Ausaaf* reporter Zaman Mughal in Islamabad.
- **November 8:** National Assembly passes the Protection of Journalists and Media Professionals Bill 2021.
- **November 8:** Social media activist and *Sada-e-Malakand* sub editor Muhammad Zada Agra shot dead by two unidentified gunmen near his house in Sakhakot, Malakand division.
- **November 14:** PEMRA bars TV channels from airing leaked CCTV footage in the Noor Mukaddam case.
- **November 15:** Karachi Union of Journalists member Azmat Ali Rehmani threatened for his news story regarding a murder case in Haripur.

- **November 16:** Islamabad High Court issues show-cause notice to Ansaar Abbasi, Mir Shakil ur Rehman and Amir Ghauri for a report regarding former chief justice.
- **November 19:** TikTok restored by PTA.
- **December 1:** President Arif Alvi signs federal safety bill into law.
- **December 5:** Local toll plaza contractor mistreats, tortures ARY reporter Asif Shehzad and Taimoor Athar at Taunsa Barrage toll plaza in Dera Ghazi Khan.
- **December 7:** GTV reporter Haider Shirazi attacked by a mob during coverage in Islamabad.
- **December 10:** Dawn-White Star photographer Faysal Mujeeb beaten up by Rangers in Karachi while covering an MQM-P event.
- **December 23:** Sindh safety bill rules to be framed soon, says Saeed Ghani.

2022

- **January 4:** Audio leaked of an alleged phone call between Maryam Nawaz and Pervez Rasheed discussing media personalities.
- **January 14:** PEMRA issues notice to *Neo TV* for airing news regarding LPG and money laundering.
- **January 17:** FIA approaches PEMRA with a request to stop TV channels from airing interviews of former chief Bashir Memon in a case involving an international fugitive.
- **January 22:** Indian government blocks 35 YouTube channels and two websites based in Pakistan.
- **January 24:** *Rohi 24* reporter Malik Abdul Rasheed and cameraman of daily *Azad Safar Multan* Asif Khokar beaten in assistant commissioners office in Haripur, Bahawalpur.
- **January 28:** Release of film *Untold Story of a Serial Killer* stopped by Punjab government.
- **January 31:** Jang Group Editor in Chief Mir Shakilur Rehamn acquitted in property case.
- **January 31:** PTI MPA Aqibullah Khan allegedly misbehaves with journalists.
- **February 4:** A GTV team including female journalist Aftab Jahan and cameraperson Rizwan Ali were harassed outside the Federal Government Polyclinic Hospital in Islamabad.
- **February 11:** PEMRA issues a show-cause notice to *News One* for comments made on an episode of *G for Gharidah*.
- **February 14:** FIA arrests journalist Sabr Hashmi for running trends against the prime minister on social media.
- **February 15:** ARY News host Iqrarul Hassan and team attacked by Intelligence Bureau officials.
- **February 16:** FIA raids analyst Mohsin Baig's house.
- **February 19:** Information Minister Fawad Chaudhry says federal cabinet grants approval for PECA amendment.
- **February 20:** President Arif Alvi promulgates ordinance to amend PECA.
- **February 23:** IHC prohibits the government from arresting people under Section 20 of PECA.

- **February 24:** Land mafia issues threats to senior journalist from Chakwal, Sajid Baloch.
- **February 25:** PEMRA bans ads of unapproved, under process and illegal housing schemes in Lahore.
- **February 28:** PM Imran labels media in Pakistan as mafias and blackmailers.
- **March 1:** *Dawn* crime reporter Munawar Azeem receives threatening calls.
- **March 2:** PBA, APNS, AEMEND, CPNE move Islamabad High Court against PECA ordinance.
- **March 3:** Landikotal Assistant Commissioner Akber Iftikhar misbehaves with local journalists.
- **March 8:** Senior journalist Hamid Mir back on air after nine months.
- **March 11:** *Such TV* anchorperson Batool Rajput harassed and detained by MNA Kanwal Shauzab.
- **March 14:** ATC grants post-arrest bail to Mohsin Baig.
- **March 21:** PEMRA issues show-cause notice to head of *Dunya News*.
- **March 27:** Private media barred from covering PTI rally in capital.
- **March 29:** *KTN* reporter Zahid Jamro arrested by Babarloi Police.
- **April 4:** Journalist Saeed Bacha arrested in Mardan after court cancels bail before arrest.
- **April 5:** PTA asks YouTube to restore Dr Israr Ahmed's YouTube channel after it was suspended on allegations of carrying anti-semitic remarks.
- **April 5:** India blocks 4 Pakistan YouTube channels amongst 22.
- **April 8:** PECA ordinance struck down by the Islamabad High Court.
- **April 10:** Raid at the home of former prime minister Imran Khan's focal person on digital Dr Arslan Khalid.
- **April 12:** PTI workers harass *Neo TV* journalist Nasrullah Malik.
- **April 13:** Seven reporters and camera persons received minor injuries at a PTI rally in Peshawar.
- **April 16:** Man arrested in Peshawar 16 for a viral video in which he asked PTI workers to kill journalists and anchor persons who were critical of Imran Khan.
- **April 16:** Journalists targeted at a PTI rally in Karachi.
- **April 19:** Information Minister Marriyum Aurangzeb says that PMDA is being disbanded.
- **April 21:** PTI workers attack *92 News* reporter Khawar Mughal.
- **April 23:** PEMRA issues a show-cause notice to *ARY News* for airing "fake/unverified news" on informal sources.
- **April 23:** A joint action committee (JAC) of the media and Information Minister Marriyum Aurangzeb agree to "enact legislation for curbing fake news".
- **April 25:** Shahbaz Gill harasses former RIUJ vice president Aun Shirazi.
- **April 28:** IHC orders FIA to stop harassing Arshad Sharif and other journalists.
- **April 30:** PML-N activists torture *ARY News* reporter Chand Nawab and attack DSNG van in Karachi.