State of Pakistani Media - 2018

Covering the Period
January 1, 2018 to December 31, 2018

By
Pakistan Press Foundation
State of the Pakistani Media in 2018

Executive summary

From special coercive law to blatant censorship, the Pakistani media has witnessed many forms of oppression in its 71 years of struggle-filled existence.

But in 2018 what the media endured also included an unprecedented level of externally induced “self-censorship” through tactics unbecoming of a responsible state. Those who refuse to fall in line suffer loss of readership and viewership. Unjustified cover-ups and the suppression of truth regarding crucial questions of public accountability have seriously affected the perception of the quality of democracy in Pakistan.

2018 was a year of elections, overt and covert pressures on the media in the run-up to the elections cast aspersions on the fairness of the electoral exercise and were widely criticized by national as well as international observers including the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP), The European Commission and the US based Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ).

As one of the most dangerous countries in the world for media persons, Pakistan has witnessed the murder of 72 journalists since 2002. Except for five cases, most of these fatalities have continued to remain unsolved and perpetrators remain unpunished. Successive governments have seemed reluctant to probe the murders of journalists.

This report State of Pakistani Media in 2018 by Pakistan Press Foundation (PPF) focuses on instances of crimes against the media, where journalists are killed, murdered, abducted, assaulted, detained, and threatened by law enforcement agencies, militants, feudal lords, and tribal leaders. TV channels, newspapers, websites and social media are blocked and banned. Media personnel and media organizations are threatened and pressured by state and non-state actors.

Instances of the arrest of journalists, issuing non-bailable arrest warrants, registration of legal cases, contempt of court notices, and imposition of fines under defamation laws were also recorded among the pressures used in 2018 that sent a chilling message to all Pakistani journalists.

During 2018, PPF investigated six cases of the murder of journalists. However, PPF determined that the primary causes of murders were personal or business animosities and rivalries rather than relating to their work as journalists.

Physical assault continued to be a chronic problem for Pakistani journalists. According to the PPF research, there were at least 22 cases of physical assault in which five journalists were injured while 25 others were beaten and manhandled to stop them from performing their professional duties.
Abducting journalists is another common tactic to stop media practitioners from expressing their views on sensitive issues. PPF documented three cases of abduction and attempted abduction in 2018. They included Gul Bukhari, writer and columnist of The Nation; Taha Siddiqui, reporter of the France 24, New York Times, The Guardian; and Zaibdar Marri, President of the Kohlu Press Club and correspondent of the Express News.

The year also witnessed the release of social media activist Samar Abbas after one year. He went missing under mysterious conditions on January 7, 2017.

The forcible intrusion by armed personnel into the premises of Karachi Press Club (KPC) was the first in the club's 60-year existence. KPC termed it an outcome of an ongoing campaign to subdue the press on the part of state and non-state actors.

Attacking the residence of a journalist is also used as pressure tactic on journalists, as they become overly cautious for the sake of their families’ safety. One such example of this in 2018 was the attack on the house of Manzoor Bughio, reporter of Channel 24 in Shaheed Benazirabad district in the Sindh province.

Online harassment is increasing throughout the world, including Pakistan. One such instance noted this year was when Saleem Safi, a prominent Pakistani journalist, columnist and anchorperson was made the target of abuse and harassment on social media for a comment he made in a television show.

PPF also documented seven cases where journalists in Pakistan face legal actions. These include: Nasrullah Khan Chaudhry, senior sub-editor of daily Nai Baat; Cyril Almeida, assistant editor and columnist of Dawn; Sailaab Mehsud of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty’s Mashaal Radio and Zafar Wazir of Khyber TV; Matiullah Jan, a journalist and host of Waqt TV; Dr. Amir Liaquat Hussain, anchorperson of BOL TV; Mir Shakil-ur-Rehman of Jang group; Dr. Shahid Masood of News One and Umar Cheema, investigative reporter of Jang group.

The systematic curtailment of freedom of expression in the form of undocumented press advices, intimidation, threats and harassment, by militant organisations and also by intelligence agencies, has left journalists and their managements too vulnerable to resist. Reprisals have taken ominous forms, including abduction and physical assaults.

The media industry in Pakistan also witnessed serious economic pressures which resulted in the closure of a television channel and several newspapers, which in turn led to the loss of employment for hundreds of journalists and other media professionals. The economic pressures include average per minute reduction in rates for government advertisements for television channels. The Ministry have cut the rates up to 1000 percent and new rates will be valid for federal and provincial governments, autonomous bodies and public sector organizations.
The circulation of some newspapers including *Dawn* remained blocked in cantonments and parts of Balochistan, and transmission of Geo television channel was blocked in many parts of the country.

On the policy front, the newly elected government of Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI) announced plans to merge the existing separate regulations for print, electronic and online media into a single powerful regulation body. Under the proposed regulation one mega regulatory body to be called Pakistan Media Regulatory Authority (PMRA) would be created with the merger of existing regulatory authorities including Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) which regulates the electronic media and Press Council of Pakistan (PCP), the quasi self-regulatory mechanism for the print media. Most media bodies including The All Pakistan Newspaper Society (APNS), Council of Pakistan Newspaper Editors (CPNE), Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists (PFUJ) and PCP have strongly opposed the proposed law.

In September 2018, government also constituted a Content Committee that would approve advertisements for the print and electronic media. The newly-formed body, headed by the Federal Minister of Information and Broadcasting Fawad Chaudhry, will work to see that no advertisement should be released to the print or electronic media by the provincial or federal government without prior approval of this committee.

Media outlets remain under pressure from the authorities to avoid reporting on several issues including criticism of law enforcement agencies. There were at least 31 instances of journalists, anchorpersons, and television channels being issued show-cause notices, suspensions of anchor persons, blocking of websites, and disruptions of distribution of newspapers.

Pakistan was among the countries that had made the largest number of requests for content restrictions in the first half on the year 2018 from January-June on leading social media platforms. According to ‘Facebook Transparency Report’ released on November 16, 2018 Pakistan emerged as the number one country in the world with 2,203 requests to Facebook for content restriction. The ‘Twitter Transparency Report’ ranked Pakistan on third highest with 3,004 profiles to the social networking site for inciting violence and spreading hate material.
Attacks on media

During the year 2018, PPF documented 72 cases of attacks on journalists which includes cases of physical assaults, abductions, attacks on residences and offices as well as cases of censorship.

Physical assaults

PPF documented twenty-two cases of physical assault in 2018 in which 30 journalists and media workers were subjected to beatings, physical assaults, manhandling and seizing and damaging their equipment.

Media workers killed

During the year PPF investigated six cases of murder of journalists. However, PPF determined that the prime causes of murders were personal or business animosities and rivalries rather than their work as journalists.

Those murdered during the year included Ehsan Sherpao, Secretary General of Charsadda Press Club; Anjum Muneer Raja, sub-editor, daily Pukaar; Zeeshan Ashraf Butt, reporter, daily Nawa-i-Waqt; Abid Hussain, correspondent of daily Naya Daur, Multan; Saeed Butt, reporter, daily Khabrain; and Muhammad Sohail Khan, reporter, daily K2 Times and AVT Khyber television channel.

Journalists injured

Five journalists were injured in targeted attacks on journalists during 2018.

On 7 April 2018, Asad Khan Betini, chief editor of monthly Nawa-e-Qaisa and correspondent of Aaj TV was severely beaten in his office in Zhob Balochistan. Betini was taken to the hospital in the provincial Quetta where he was admitted. According to the journalist, he and his brother were warned by the then provincial agriculture minister Sheikh Jaffar Khan Mandokhail to stop writing critical stories about him.

On April 27, Shehzad Afridi reporter of Mashriq TV was reporting on the Karkhano Market in Peshawar Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) police check post when they stopped him from coverage and severely assaulted him. The journalist fell unconscious after he was allegedly hit with butt of gun. He was then shifted to Hayatabad police station and kept in detention for some hours.
On August 12, Khan Muhammad Khan, district reporter of daily Kawish and KTN TV and President of Khairpur Press Club was beaten up along with two cameramen Fayyaz Shaikh of KTN TV and Jan Mohammad Narejo of Mehran TV. A family was protesting against the police outside a police station in Khairpur over lack of action by the police it the case of kidnapping of their daughter. When cameramen Shaikh and Narejo reached there for covering the protest, police tried to stop them and asked them to leave. When they refused, police officers along with Station House Officer (SHO) Mushtaq Jatoi beat up the cameramen and put them in the lock up for three hours.

During the night between June 5 and 6, 2018 Asad Kharal, an investigative journalist was assaulted by unknown masked persons in Lahore, the capital city of Punjab province. He received multiple injuries and was rushed to a hospital. Kharal, who is also an anchorperson at BOL TV, is known for his stories about corruption in Pakistan. Superintendent of Police (SP) Cantonment Lahore Bilal Zafar said they have received a complaint that some unidentified men had assaulted Kharal.

According to an Interim Report submitted to Anti-Terrorism Court (ATC) the attackers of Kharal are not arrested yet as they are still freehand. The report was submitted in the mid of December by Joint Investigation Team headed by Deputy Inspector General (DIG) Muhammad Idrees.

Journalists manhandled

25 media professionals were beaten and manhandled to stop them from performing their professional duties.

On October 23, Abuzar Afridi, who is working for daily Express from Landikotal, was rounded up by police when he was filming a video of police raid in Shinwari market in Karkhano. The area located on the border between Peshawar and Khyber Tribal district, is known as a hub of smuggled foreign goods. He was shifted to Hayatabad Police Station where, according to members of Landikotal Press Club, he was physically beaten in the lock up. He was kept in lock up for five hours and later released after protests by local press club and journalist union.

On September 30 Syed Zawar Kazmi, Bureau Chief of Channel 24, was making video of the elevator of District Headquarters Hospital, Sargodha, which had been out of order for six months. The doctors stopped the journalist from coverage and started beating him. However, police reached the spot to save Kazmi from the doctors’ wrath. No case was registered against the attacking doctors as medical superintendent of the hospital apologized to Kazmi.

On September 19, Jawad Khan Deputy Superintendent of Police (DSP), in the town of Dera Ghazi Khan detained and assaulted Sher Afgan Buzdar, reporter of BOL TV during coverage at Basti Leghari. Gaddai police team under the supervision of DSP City Khan tried to arrest a man at Basti Leghari without issuing him arrest warrants. The police tried to cover the raid but journalist Buzdar shot video of the incident through a phone. The police than taken the journalist to the police
van and all footage of the incident were deleted from his phone. After intervention of District Police Officer (DPO) Imran Yaqoob, the journalist was released by the DSP.

On September 15, Jehangir Chaudhry, a photographer of daily Jang was attacked during the coverage of Capital Development Authority-led drive against encroachment in Bahria Enclave in Islamabad. The Enclave’s administration stopped cameraman from coverage and tried to snatch his camera.

On September 13, six reporters representing different TV channels and newspapers were assaulted and then forcibly removed from Civil Hospital, Thul in Sindh Province by doctors and hospital staff. The reporters had reached the hospital to cover the visit of Justice (R) Ameer Hani, Chairman of the Water Commission. Those assaulted included Zafar Khoso of 7 News, Abbas Gul Mastoi of Hum TV/Roz News, Muhammad Moosa Baloch of ARY News, Mukhtiar Dhul of Mehran TV, Muhammad Moosa Sarki of Sindh TV and Abdul Razzaq Burhro of daily Mehran.

On August 13, Farid Sabri reporter of Hum News television channel was attacked at the entry gate of Islamabad High Court by police even after he showed his accreditation card. The journalist went there to cover legal case of jailed Former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif.

On July 21, cameraman Kamran Paracha working for Dunya News television channel in Mingora, was attacked by workers of Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) in Mingora during Shahbaz Sharif’s meeting in Mingora. The journalist registered complaint in the police station’s daily log but made no arrest.

On July 3, reporter Chand Nawab of 92 News channel was attacked at Karachi Airport by workers of PTI, the ruling party at the Federal level and in three out of four provinces. The journalist was at the airport to cover arrival of PTI leader Imran Khan, the supporters of PTI pushed the reporter and he fell on the ground.

On May 15, Murtaza Zeb Zehri correspondent of Voice of America (VOA) Urdu was beaten and manhandled by administration of Sheikh Zayed Hospital in Quetta while on duty. He was reporting Sheikh Zayed Hospital’s job scandal when the administration ordered security guards to beat him and break his camera. Taking notice of the incident, Minister for Home and Tribal Affairs Sarfraz Bugti ordered an inquiry into the incident following which five security guards were arrested and an FIR lodged against them in New Sariyab Police Station.

Abductions

Abducting journalists is an easy tactic in Pakistan to stop him from expressing his views and writing on sensitive issues.
Gul Bukhari, a contributing writer of the daily *The Nation*, who is known for her criticism of Pakistani security agencies, was intercepted by some unidentified persons in the Cantonment area of Lahore, while she was on her way to appear on a TV show on Waqt News Channel, the night of 5 June. She returned home in morning as the abduction lasted a few hours.

Her husband Ali Nadir said in a WhatsApp message that Bukhari left for the office at 10:40 and was apparently picked up on the way. "It seems to be plain clothes people but we don't have any other information" he said.

Pakistani journalist Taha Siddiqui managed to evade an abduction attempt in Islamabad, the capital of Pakistan, by armed men in two cars, who intercepted him as he was on his way to the airport on the morning of January 10, 2018. According to the journalist who reports for *France 24, New York Times*, *The Guardian* and other international publications, armed men stopped and pulled him out from the taxi, started beating him and warned they would shoot him if he resisted.

A criminal complaint has been launched in Koral Police station and the journalist was examined medically at the Pakistan Institute of Medical Sciences (PIMS) hospital in Islamabad. Balochistan is considered as one of the dangerous part of Pakistan for practicing journalism. During the 2018 General Elections journalists were not allowed to do fair reporting of the elections.

In one incident, Zaibdar Marri, President of the Kohlu Press Club and correspondent of the Express News went missing on July 13, 2018. After 12 days abduction the journalist returned home uninjured. Zaib had been covering the election campaign of Gazain Marri whose brother and opponent, Changez Marri who won in 2013 and reportedly has the backing of the establishment. Local journalists said that Marri received threatening phone calls to stop reporting on and writing about Gazain Marri who returned from self-imposed exile a year earlier.

The year also witnessed the release of abducted social media activist after one year. Missing social media activist and the head of Civil Progressive Alliance Pakistan (CPAP) Samar Abbas returned home after a year on March 6, 2018. Abbas went missing on January 7, 2017, when five social media activists started disappearing in Pakistan.

**Attack on media institution**

On November 8, a group of armed men forcibly entered the premises of KPC and started making video recordings of different parts of the premises. At around 10:30 pm, the armed men in plain clothes reached the press club in cars and land cruisers accompanied by a police van. They were carrying cameras and phone locators and started searching different rooms, kitchen and the upper floor of the building. The office bearers of the press club immediately informed the Karachi office of the Inter Services Public Relations (ISPR), the media public relations wing of the Pakistan
military, which denied the involvement of the military in the incident, holding the Counter Terrorism Department of Karachi Police answerable for the raid.

According to the press release issued by KPC, the raid on press club was another outcome of a continuing campaign to subdue the press on the part of state and non-state actors.

**Attack on residence of journalist**

Attacking the residence of a journalist is also a way to stop him from covering sensitive issues, as a journalist will not do his job at the stake of his family's life and they prefer to stay silence and attack on the house of Manzoor Bughio, reporter of Channel 24 is an example of stopping him from revealing the truth.

On August 24, six armed men on three bikes attacked the house of Bughio in Ali Ghulam Bughio, village in Shaheed Benazirabad district, Sindh province. According to the journalist, the attack occurred days after he covered story on diesel mafia in Daulatpur, a town in Nawabshah district on August 17, 2018. Bughio said, “A goon named Saleem Dahiri first threatened me on phone and then attacked my house.”

**Legal pressures**

Nasrullah Khan Chaudhry, senior sub-editor of daily *Nai Baat*, who was arrested on November 10 for allegedly possessing banned literature, has been granted bail on November 28 by the ATC. The Counter-Terrorism Department (CTD) alleged that the journalist was carrying some journals and booklets about Afghan Jihad and the Punjabi Taliban which contained material intended to sow discord on sectarian grounds as well as to motivate people to take part in “Jihad”. The court ordered the journalist to submit a surety Rs100,000 as a bail bond.

On September 24, Lahore High Court (LHC) issued non-bailable arrest warrants for Cyril Almeida and ordered his name be put on Exit Control List (ECL) after he failed to appear before the court for third time in the hearing of treason case for publishing an interview with Former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif in which Sharif asked why militants who attacked Hotel Taj in Mumbai, India were allowed to leave Pakistan. On October 8, LHC ordered removal Almeida’s name from ECL and also withdrew non-bailable arrest warrants issued against him.

On December 8, police in the city of Dera Ismail Khan in KP filed cases against two journalists from South Waziristan for covering protest rally of Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) where slogans were raised against the military.
Local police lodged criminal complaint known as First Information Report (FIR) against 30 people, who participated in the PTM rally including the two journalists who claimed to be just covering the rally. The journalists Sailaab Mehsud of Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty’s Mashaal Radio and Zafar Wazir of local Khyber TV, were booked for raising slogans against state institutions and inciting the public to violence.

According to the journalist Mehsud, the Inspector General (Frontier Corps) Abid Abbas told him that his name was placed in FIR by mistake and will be removed soon and the journalist Wazir should submit an application that he was not involved in the rally.

On February 7, the Islamabad High Court (IHC) issued a contempt of court notice to Matiullah Jan, a journalist working for a Waqt TV. Justice Shaukat Aziz Siddiqui took notice of comments against the High Court in the talk show and ruled that if Matiullah Jan did not appear in the court for the next hearing, PEMRA should cancel the license of Waqt TV for airing the controversial programme. The court remarked that anchorman had organized an insulting talk show against the high court, besides, leveling groundless allegations against the court. Jan should appear in the court in person for the next hearing, the court ordered. The court also issued contempt of court notices to the owner and producer of the said television channel. On February 21, the court dropped contempt charges against anchorman after he submitted an apology.

**Censorship**

On November 22, 2018, Justice Qazi Isa of the Supreme Court while hearing of a case relating to the 20-day sit-in in Islamabad staged by the Tehreek-i-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) in November last year, asked the attorney general whether there was of censorship by some powers or some insidious forces were at work in the country.

Media outlets remain under pressure from the authorities to avoid reporting on several issues including criticism of government institutions and the judiciary.

2018 witnessed at least 31 cases of censorship where journalists, anchorman, and television channels were issued show-cause notices, banned, websites were blocked, distribution of newspaper disrupted etc.

**Disruption of electronic media**

The transmission of Geo TV channel went off-air in various parts of Punjab from April 1 and it continues to be disrupted in many areas of Pakistan. Television programmes in Pakistan are distributed by cable operators, and there are allegations that they are pressured by political groups and law enforcement agencies to disrupt and suspend transmission of programs to punish channels. Disrupting the broadcasts of Geo TV started after the channel broadcast unproven allegation that intelligence agencies were responsible for the near fatal attack on its news Anchor Hamid Mir on April 19, 2014.

Broadcasts by Geo television channels, particularly Geo News, the news and current affairs channel were disrupted even though PEMRA issued instructions to cable operators to restore Geo to normal distribution, or face suspension of their licenses.

According to the HRCP’s fact finding report ‘Curbs on freedom of expression in Pakistan’ launched in August 2018, at least three instances in which cable operators in Punjab and GB say they were compelled to take certain channels off air. In each case, they received a telephone call from persons identifying themselves as state or intelligence agency officials, warning them to ‘remove’ Geo TV from the list of channels being transmitted or to move it to the very end, thereby making it less accessible.

Those of the TV channel managements who agreed to talk about their experience over the last 12 months or so confirmed that the disruption in their position by cable operators and denial of advertisements by quarters managed by the military and semi-military organizations has affected their financial stability and ability to pay salaries on time.

On January 19, 2018 the government of Pakistan shut down the Pakistan operations of the Pushto-language radio channel of US Government funded Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. The notification issued by the Ministry of Interior said Radio Mashaal was 'found against the interests of Pakistan and in line with a hostile intelligence agency's agenda'.

**Disrupting distribution of newspapers**

Journalists in the print and broadcast media have complained of interference with freedom of expression.

It is only through word of mouth that one learns the stories of how the media and media workers are being forced to practice self-censorship. And those who tell their harrowing stories refuse to go on record seemingly in the interest of their economic and physical well-being.
Newspapers distributors in Balochistan, Punjab and Sindh, again without going on record for the same reasons mentioned earlier have confirmed allegations by Dawn that disruptions and intermittent closures in commercial establishments and residential areas associated with the military have had a serious impact on its circulation. Following the publication of an interview with former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif on 12 May 2018, sales agents allege that the distribution of Dawn was disrupted daily in at least 20 targeted cities and towns – specifically in cantonment areas and army offices and schools. And in the aftermath the journalist who conducted the interview, Cyril Almeida is facing treason charges.

Hawkers report being subjected to continual harassment, threats and physical coercion by military personnel while attempting to deliver copies of Dawn to regular subscribers. At least a couple of distributors confirm that they were asked to provide information on their subscribers. Dawn has also claimed that, since October 2016 that is soon after publication of what is called Dawn leaks on October 6, 2016, it has suffered a complete ban on advertising from organizations falling under the domain of the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), including Defense Housing Authority (DHA) and other commercial establishments.

Dawn is perhaps, the most influential newspaper in country and the combined reach of news and views of Geo-Jang-The News makes it the market leader by lengths.

CPNE in their resolution has expressed concern over the condition of freedom of the press in the country, saying the media is undergoing a phase of extreme suffocation and unnecessary restrictions.

The resolution also expressed concerns over the various complaints of editors about restrictions on circulation of their newspapers. The resolution stressed unity among all media teams, media organizations and other stakeholders and called upon them to formulate a joint strategy to ensure an end to indirect restrictions on the media.

**Closure of press clubs in Balochistan and KP**

The Bajaur Press Club in KP was closed on November 13, on the orders of senior officers of the local administration due to the fear of terrorist attack. President of the Bajaur Press Club said the senior officials informed the press club of the threat that led to members of the press club deciding to shut down the press club. After 10 days of closure the press club was later reopened on November 23.

On January 19, 2018, BLF withdrew media boycott which it announced in October 2017 leading to closure of several press clubs and attacks on press clubs and newspaper distribution offices in the province.
On October 13, 2017, banned militant groups in the province, Balochistan Liberation Front (BLF), United Baloch Army (UBA) and Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) had published statements accusing newspapers of being part of government's 'anti-Baloch' policies and warned media organizations and journalists of ominous consequences if it did not change.

The banned group had set October 24 as the deadline in this regard. The BLF statement specifically criticized and warned three newspapers from Balochistan, daily Aazadi Quetta, daily Tawar and daily Intekhab for not providing coverage to the separatist, and militant groups in Balochistan. The statement added that BLF's views were endorsed by UBA and the BLA.

After the deadline passed, there were continuous attacks. On October 25, a grenade was hurled at the Hub Press Club. Several passersby were injured in the attack. On October 26, a van carrying newspapers was ordered to stop by armed men in Awaran. They fired at the van's tires and burnt the newspapers. On the same day in Turbat, the Pak News Agency was attacked when an explosive was hurled at its office. Eight people including passersby were injured.

On October 30, an employee of local daily Qudrat was assaulted and newspapers burned by unknown assailants in Quetta. On November 1, threats were issued to several press clubs in the province to suspend their activities, which resulted in closure of press clubs.

Dalbandin Press Club was closed on the same day after threats, Panjgur Press Club was closed on November 2. After continued threats, Lasbela, Utal, Kharan and Sarawan press clubs were closed down on November 3 and Khuzdar press club was closed down on November 7.

**Press advices, intimidation and threats**

The systematic curtailment of freedom of expression in the form of undocumented press advice, intimidation, threats and harassment, reportedly by state or intelligence agencies, has left many journalists and their management too vulnerable to resist. Reprisals have taken ominous forms, including abduction and assault in some instances.

Journalists received calls, threatening them to stop covering sensitive matters, else they will face serious consequences. Hassan Tariq, crime reporter of Dawn news channel Peshawar Bureau; Ismail Domki, Former President of Nawabshah Union of Journalists and district correspondent of Express News and daily Express, Nawabshah; Saeed Mazari, correspondent of Channel 24 in Rojhan town in Rajanpur district of Punjab province; Anwar Anjum, correspondent of Aaj News, Mingora, KP are those journalists who received threatening calls.

Verbal press advice, received either on the telephone or during a visit, usually pertains to what should not be published or broadcast. HRCP interviews reveal that the most commonly tabooed...
subjects are missing persons, the PTM, Baloch separatists and rights activists such as Mama Qadeer, the Panama trial and NAB references, the disqualification and arrest of Nawaz Sharif, references to any uncertain decisions by the judiciary, allegations of judicial overreach and questions about the armed forces.

At least seven editors and reporters in Gilgit Baltistan (GB) have testified to receiving press advice and being threatened with terrible consequences – including threats of arrest, violence or death – if they do not comply. Most say they are warned against giving coverage to nationalists and reporting negatively about state institutions and government departments. In one case, an editor and publisher who did not comply, despite being offered bribes and his life threatened five times, was accused of being on the payroll of foreign spy agencies. A case was registered against him under the Terrorism Act and he was arrested. He remains in prison.

Overall, continuing intimidation and the perceived need to self-censor has severely hampered impartial journalism. It has also taken a toll on members of staff, some of whom have refused to work or left. This has left particularly the newspapers beleaguered, with threats also emanating from religious radicals, separatists and officials of nationalist or political parties if news on their activities is not published.

One of the reasons for the establishment to be acting with complete impunity is the failure of the working journalists to speak in one voice as main journalist union PFUJ is too split. Many had been either compromised or were too terrified to take a stand, even going so far, said one respondent, as to ‘blame the victim’.

**Online harassment**

Online harassment is another way of attacking a journalist that is increasing throughout the world, including Pakistan. Journalism predators have discovered another way of harassing a journalist, abusing them on social networking sites and calling it their freedom of expression. These aggressive cyber bullying campaigns are carried out by groups of individuals or political groups, just to troll a journalist for reporting the facts.

One instance noted this year where a Pakistani journalist, columnist and anchorperson Saleem Safi was made the target of abuse and harassment on social media after a comment he made in a TV show on August 19 that during his tenure as prime minister, Nawaz Sharif had borne the expenses of PM house from his pocket. Social media users especially supporters of ruling party PTI started a campaign against the journalist, trolling him for his claims. Local press clubs and journalist unions condemned and staged protest demonstrations against character assassination of a journalist on social media.
**Blocking of online content**

The Freedom House has declared Pakistan “Not Free” in terms of internet use for the seventh consecutive year in its global report released in December 2018. The report showed that the country’s ranking had been worsening over the years.

The report placed Pakistan at 73, out of 100 worst in Internet Freedom Status index for 2018 — two places worse than previous year’s ranking. The internet users in Pakistan continued to be arrested and prosecuted for online expression, while torture and sexual violence during detention remained a problem.

**Blocking content on Facebook**

According to ‘Facebook Transparency Report’ released on November 16, Pakistan emerged as No 1 country in the world when it comes to censoring content on the Facebook.

Pakistan made 2,203 requests to Facebook for content restriction, the highest in the world, during the first six months of 2018. The country recorded more than 70 percent increase in such requests as compared to corresponding period of the last year. Pakistan has about 36 million Facebook users, according to the company data.

The data analysis of revealed increase in Facebook censorship was steady in Pakistan. For the last six months of 2017, Pakistan had made 300 such requests while in the first six months of the last year, only 177 requests were made by Pakistan.

However, in terms of PTA’s complaint against Facebook users, Pakistan saw a decline in the first half of this year with 1,233 requests against user accounts. In the last half of 2017, Pakistan had made 1,320 complaints against Facebook accounts. Pakistan was 13th in this ranking of requests against Facebook users while US was first with 70,528 and India remained second with 23,047 requests.

According to report, in 2018 Pakistan made 92 emergency requests and 1,141 requests were made through legal process. In 58 percent such cases, Facebook shared data of users with Pakistani authorities, the report said.

**Blocking content on Twitter**

According to the ‘Twitter Transparency Report’, between January and June 2018, the government reported 3,004 profiles to the social networking site for allegedly “inciting violence” and
“spreading hate material”, and sent requests seeking the removal of 243 accounts. By contrast, during the six months immediately preceding, it reported only 674 accounts to twitter and made 75 removal requests. Pakistan ranks third highest globally in the number of accounts which were either reported or were the subject of requests for removal in 2018.

In August 2018 the micro-blogging platform Twitter was warned that it could be banned in the country if it fails to comply with a notice to block objectionable content. On August 15, PTA informed the Senate Standing Committee on Cabinet Secretariat that other social media platforms including Facebook and Youtube have already acceded to the Pakistan government’s requests to block objectionable content, while Twitter has not. Director General of PTA's Internet Policy and Web Analysis, Nisar Ahmed said in the meeting, "Out of a hundred requests from Pakistan to block certain offensive material, roughly five per cent are entertained. Twitter ignored all the remaining requests."

The Senate Committee was informed about the IHC mandate to issue Twitter with a final notice, asking it to respond to requests from Pakistan or risk being blocked. The committee was also informed that IHC had taken notice of the growing instances of offensive content being posted on social networking platforms.

**Blocking VOA website**

The government of Pakistan blocked the Urdu and Pashto websites of VOA, U.S. government-funded international news organization. The VOA’s Urdu language website is blocked since second week of December after the organization covered the press conference of PTM’s leader Mohsin Dawar on Facebook Live. Although "Deewa", the Pashto-language news website of VOA is blocked since late October.

**Interference in Pakistani media coverage of elections 2018**

International election observers, media organizations and news outlets, prominently discussed the restrictions on Pakistani media and termed it as pre-poll interference in the lead up to the general elections held on 25th July.

The European Union (EU) Election Observation Mission to Pakistan in its preliminary statement on General Elections noted that was the first time in the country’s history that elections were held after two elected civilian governments completed their full terms.

However, the EU statement then went on to state that the elections took place against a background of allegations of interference in the electoral process by the military-led establishment and the role of the judiciary as a political actor.
The EU report asserted that “media outlets and journalists suffer from restrictions and curtailment on freedom of expression, which has resulted in extraordinary levels of self-censorship.”

Giving examples of restriction on media the report of EU Election Observation Mission report noted that the distribution of Dawn was disrupted in May 2018 following an interview with Nawaz Sharif. In March 2018, Geo TV was taken off air across most of the country and was not available on cable networks in cantonment areas throughout the campaign period.

Several key broadcast media editors received phone calls from state actors advising not to live broadcast the return of Nawaz Sharif on 13 July. Media were also asked to mute any statement that might contain “anti-judiciary” speech. In addition, media did not air interviews conducted with the Sharifs prior to their return, or PML-N and Pakistan People’s Party (PPP) leaders’ accusations against the military of engineering the elections. The media referred to the LHC from 16 April 2018 that upheld the ban on “anti-judiciary speeches”, based on Article 19 and 68 of the Constitution.

The report further noted that an exclusive interview with Nawaz Sharif before he left London for Pakistan, conducted by a prominent Pakistani journalist, was not aired on any of the domestic channels. On Election Day, the statement given by Shahbaz Sharif after he voted was muted on all TV channels.

In a statement on July 27, The US State department while commending Pakistanis who turned out to vote expressed concern about flaws in the pre-voting electoral process, as expressed by the HRCP. These included constraints placed on freedoms of expression and association during the campaign period that were at odds with Pakistani authorities’ stated goal of a fully fair and transparent election. The United States concurred with the conclusions of the European Union Election Observation Mission that while there were positive changes to the legal framework for elections in Pakistan, these were overshadowed by restrictions on freedom of expression and imbalanced campaign opportunities.

**Media laws**

Various government agencies at federal, provincial and district levels are directly or indirectly involved in media regulation. Similarly, the code of conduct of print journalism is self-regulatory and PCP regulates issues like code of conduct. Similarly, in the age of mega data and social media regulatory functions are only limited to ‘criminal acts of cyber crimes’ and Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) holds the mandate to investigate and prosecute cybercrimes. The government at any time can take its complaints to PEMRA and PCP.

The various media bodies – APNS, CPNE, PBA and PFUJ can be approached for establishing a reasonable working relationship between the media and the government without compromising media’s commitment to hold accountable those in positions of power.
In the opinion of the newly elected PTI government the above indicates that media regulation is fragmented and that a new arrangement has become necessary.

Federal Information Minister Fawad Chaudhry announced on August 29, that existing media regulatory authorities will be merged into one body called the Pakistan Media Regulatory Authority (PMRA) and the body will also include media representatives.

Chaudhry said that after reviewing the role of PEMRA and PCP, the government has decided to form a single regulatory body which will not only look after electronic media but also print media and social media. The media bodies in Pakistan including PFUJ, CPNE and APNS opposed the decision of government.

CPNE in a statement stated, “CPNE has a clear stand that there is no need for special media laws as media should be regulated through ordinary laws.” The statement added, “Since the print, electronic and digital media had separate functions, problems and impact, it would not be wise to enact a single law for the three categories and any move to control media under the garb of media regulation would never win acceptance and support in the country.”

The APNS also rejected the merger of media regulatory and said, “the proposed system was is of the considered opinion that the proposed licensing system and measure intended to tame, control and subjugate the media, are in gross conflict with Article 19 of the Constitution and the basic human rights.”

PCP on December 28 also rejected government’s proposed creation of PMRA and urged the government to ensure the freedom of press and added PCP is the only forum which deals with the public complaints and redresses the grievances of people.

**Formation of Content Committee**

According to a notification issued on September 17, the PTI government constituted a ‘Content Committee’ that would approve advertisements for print and electronic media. The newly-formed body will work as a watchdog to see that no advertisement should be released to print or electronic media by the provincial or federal government without prior approval of this committee. The Information Minister Chaudhry Fawad Hussain will head the committee and other members of committee include information ministers of KP, Punjab and Balochistan, as well as Special Assistant to the PM on media Iftikhar Durrani and Senator Faisal Javed, has been constituted on Prime Minister Imran Khan’s directives.

In a statement APNS, has expressed concern over the decision to form a content committee. “The APNS considers this as a surgical strike which would perish the independence and viability of
media and would be used as a lever to curb press freedom in the country.” The APNS regrets that through this action, the federal government has initiated “a policy to control print and electronic media” through over centralization of advertisements which is the backbone of the media’s economy.

**Economic pressures**

The media industry is under severe economic pressures because of reduction in government advertising by seventy percent and private sector advertising by fifty reports. Many of the Pakistan’s newspapers and TV channels are dependent for their survival, on government advertising revenue, which because of the economic crisis have been reduced by the new government.

The government also reduced rates of advertisements charged by the private television channels for government ads and campaigns by 60 to 95 percent. The news rates were applicable from December 27, 2018 and are valid for federal and provincial governments, autonomous bodies and public sector organizations.

Pakistan’s largest *Jang/ Geo* media group announced the closure of three of its daily newspapers namely, Urdu-language dailies *Awam* and *Inqilab* and English-language *Daily News*. Daily *Jang* also closed down Peshawar and Faisalabad editions of the newspaper. One major TV channel Waqt News has closed operations.

Many periodicals, newspapers and TV channels are on the verge of closing down or trying to survive by massive downsizing of staff, reduction in number of pages and services, and drastic reduction in staff salaries.

According to CPNE, it seems like the newspapers are being subjected to economic sanctions in a bid to indirectly control the freedom of press. CPNE said that by subjecting the newspapers to “economic death” an attempt is being made to end freedom of expression and information, which is against the basic rights of freedom of press.
PAKISTAN PRESS FOUNDATION

Press Centre, Shahrah Kamal Ataturk, Karachi, 74200, Pakistan

92-21-32633215 - 32627882

92-21-32631275 - 32631125

pakistanpressfoundation.org

twitter.com/Pakistan_Press

facebook.com/PakistanPressFoundation