

Pakistan Press Foundation (PPF) Press Freedom in Pakistan 2020-21

2020, and the first four months of 2021 have seen an increased muzzling of media content in thus limiting the space for expression in Pakistan. While murder, physical assaults, extra-legal abductions as well as threats and arrests of media personnel continued unabated, the past year also saw a focus on attempts to directly control the very content being produced by the media. Directives issued by the media regulatory bodies, bans on entire platforms and efforts to create rules that enhance legal repercussions have created an environment where the media is censored, and journalists are pushed towards self-censorship.

A new challenge was added to the mix in the past year with the spread of COVID-19 which has taken the lives of several journalists and media practitioners during the last twelve months. In addition to the safety of journalists from the virus itself, the pandemic has created new challenges in terms of press freedom. As the world increasingly relied on online platforms such as Twitter, in Pakistan, these social media platforms became the source of trolling and coordinated attacks on the media particularly women journalists who were reporting on COVID-19. In terms of broadcast media, the Pakistan Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) also issued sets of directives for how TV channels were permitted to cover the pandemic.

In the period covering January 2020 to April 2021, Pakistan Press Foundation (PPF) has recorded: 1 murder of a journalist due to his work, 10 incidents of arrests and detentions, 4 incidents of abduction and kidnapping, 16 incidents of physical assault, 13 incidents of threats, 4 incidents of raids and attacks, 5 incidents of major internet restrictions or blackouts, 22 directives by PEMRA that curtail free expression, 7 incidents of legal action against journalists and 6 instances of legislative action that negatively affect free expression in Pakistan.

While physical attacks against journalists have continued for decades, there is still no safety bill to protect the media in Pakistan. In February 2020, a draft bill for the safety of media professionals drafted by the federal Ministry of Human Rights ministry was presented to the cabinet that approved it "in principle" but fell short of formally approving it. Thus, the journalists safety bill has yet to be legislated.

PPF has been actively lobbying to push for the passage of the bill and we urge the federal cabinet to follow through on this. In the lobbying efforts, PPF also discussed the matter with the Sindh provincial government. A separate draft bill for the province was prepared and the Sindh government has shown interest in passing this bill at a provincial level.

Meanwhile regulatory bodies in the country have acted with overreach and have become tools for the government to block content. While PEMRA is the media regulatory body for broadcast media, its directives issued during 2020-21 have been akin to acting as censors on content. PEMRA has slapped blanket bans on topics of coverage that are important current developments in the country. This has resulted in censorship by the media that are unable to

cover these developments and inform their audiences. The free flow of information has been restricted by these blanket bans.

In just the first four months of 2021, PEMRA has issued directives on coverage of the National Accountability Bureau, banned coverage of the now proscribed Tehreek-e-Labbaik (TLP) party and barred journalists from reporting on sources on cabinet meetings.

The year also saw more legislative action, changes of rules as well as other legal barriers to free expression being enacted, particularly to freedom of expression online. In 2020, attempts to limit free speech online particularly on social media platforms picked up intensity.

The most evident measure of this was legislation to monitor content online. In January 2020, the federal cabinet approved The Citizens Protection (Against Online Harm) Rules, 2020 under The Pakistan Telecommunications Act, 1996 and The Pakistan Electronic Crimes Act 2016 (PECA). These draconian rules were reported by the media gave a great degree of control to the government in monitoring content online including assisting law enforcement agencies to access and remove data and content within 24 hours. According to these the rules, “the interpretations of the regulations by the authorities in Pakistan shall take precedence over any community standards or rules or community guidelines or policies or any other instruments devised by a social media company.” These rules were met by strong pushback which led to their suspension in March 2020.

In November 2020, the Ministry of Information Technology notified the “Removal and Blocking of Unlawful Online Content (Procedure, Oversight and Safeguards) Rules 2020”. These rules have been challenged in the courts.

In 2020, journalists directly felt the brunt of Pakistan Telecommunication Authority’s (PTA) measures to restrict content on social media and to ramp up criminalization of content shared online. Criminal complaints were registered against media workers for content they had shared on social media.

This direct policing of content shared online alongside a growing effort to legislate and create rules to control content on these platforms resulted in a shrinking space for free expression in the online sphere that was more open and accessible than traditional media.

Measures to control the flow of content online led to the temporary ban on the popular video streaming social media platform, Tik Tok in 2020. While Tik Tok was restored days after the ban was imposed, it showed the extent to which the government bodies are willing to go to restrict content online. Once again in 2021, the application was temporarily blocked and then restored.

As there is increased policing of content online, more restrictive directives issued for broadcast media and no legal protection for journalists who continue to face physical attacks, the year

presents a bleak picture for press freedom in Pakistan. In addition to this, the spread of COVID-19 has created a new challenge for the media to tackle and led to new attacks on the media.

Recommendations:

To improve the unacceptable situation that prevails in Pakistan related to freedom of expression The Pakistan Press Foundation (PPF) calls for immediate action on the following:

In this section of the report, we focus on ways in which SDG 16.10.1 compliance can be improved, particularly measures that the government can take to improve the situation.

- Effective national and provincial legislations for protection of journalists and media practitioners must be enacted without any delay.

- To end the current state of near-absolute levels of impunity, the federal and provincial governments must ensure credible investigation and vigorous criminal prosecution in all cases involving killing, kidnapping, enforced disappearance, arbitrary detention and torture of journalists and media practitioners.

- The government must ensure that stakeholders are actively involved in the process of drafting legislations, rules and regulations related to social media.

- In terms of vaccination against COVID-19, the role of journalists on the frontline and their exposure to the virus should be considered when developing a vaccine roll out beyond healthcare workers and age groupings.

Incidents of attacks on media in Pakistan from January 2020 to April 2021

1) Killing of journalists and media practitioners because of their work*

2020

One incident recorded.

- February 16- *KTN* journalist Aziz Memon's body recovered in Mehrabpur in the Sindh province.

2021

Zero incidents recorded.

*In terms of killings, PPF includes cases of the murder of media personnel that were confirmed to have occurred in connection to their work or while on the field as a media personnel.

2) Arrests and Detentions

2020

Seven incidents recorded.

- January 16- *Channel Five* and daily *Khabrain* journalist Azharul Haq Wahid arrested by the Federal Investigation Agency.
- March 12- *Jang and Geo Media Group* Editor in Chief Mir Shakilur Rehman arrested by the National Accountability Bureau.
- April 6- *24 News* reporter Tauqeer Zaidi and cameraperson Wajahat Zaidi arrested by local police in Dera Ismail Khan.
- April 28- Abaseen Union of Journalists' member Mohammad Iqbal arrested in Swabi by police on instruction of officials.
- June 20- *Samaa TV* journalist Saeed Ali Achakzai and *Khyber News TV* journalist Mateen Achakzai arrested and beaten in Chaman.
- September 23- *24 News Television* senior journalist Ehtisham Kiani arrested by police outside Islamabad High Court.
- December 25- *Neo News* reporter Ali Raza Sheikh and *Roz News* reporter Aneel Asghar detained for coverage of police checkpoint in Gujar Khan Rawalpindi.

2021

Three incidents recorded.

- January 23- *Qaumi Lalkar* reporter Malik Ehtisham and cameraman Munawar Abbasi detained in Bani Gali while distributing newspapers.
- 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 — detained by Muzaffarabad police.
- March 30- *Daily Riyasat* and *KNN* journalist Noor Islam arrested by Mangho Pir Police in Karachi.

3) Abductions and Kidnappings

2020

Three incidents recorded.

- July 21- Senior journalist Matiullah Jan abducted from Islamabad.
- September 12- *Express Tribune* journalist Bilal Farooqi picked up in Karachi.
- October 23- *Geo News* senior reporter Ali Imran Syed goes missing.

2021

One incident recorded.

- February 18- *Associated Press of Pakistan* and *Daily Islam* correspondent Saifullah Jan kidnapped, tortured, and dragged to an office of ruling party Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf.

4) Physical Assaults

2020

Five incidents recorded.

- January 5- Federal minister Fawad Chaudhry slaps senior anchorperson Mubashir Lucman.
- February 8- *Vsh News* reporter Sajjad Noor and cameraperson Rehan Bizenjo injured in a knife attack in Pasni, Balochistan.
- May 1- *Daily Pahanji Akhbar* and *Times News TV* reporter Aftab Hussain Keerio sustained multiple injuries; found unconscious in Bhirya City.
- June 20- *Samaa TV* journalist Saeed Ali Achakzai and *Khyber News TV* journalist Mateen Achakzai arrested and beaten in Chaman.
- October 18- *Samaa TV* reporter Sanjay Sadhwani manhandled at Karachi rally by the coalition of opposition political parties Pakistan Democratic Movement.

2021

Eleven incidents recorded.

- January 12- *Daily Metro Watch* Editor Zahid Farooq Malik 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 attacked while covering a cockfight in Mehrabpur.
- January 18- *Geo News* cameraperson Nasir Mughal beaten by accused and their lawyers while covering Barrister Fahad Malik murder case at an anti-terrorism court in Islamabad.
- February 8- *Ary News* cameraperson Jahangir Baloch attacked by lawyers protesting at the Islamabad High Court.
- February 11- *City 42* reporter Zain Madni Hussaini and cameraperson manhandled by DSP while covering traffic problems in Lahore during cricket matches.
- February 16- *Bol News* cameraperson Muhammad Rehan 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 ruling party Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf.
- March 19- Police attack vehicle of *7 News* Director News Amir Sohail in a protest after he aired footage of a fake police encounter.
- April 14- *ARY News* reporter Qamar Butt beaten by protesters of the now proscribed Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) in Faisalabad during their countrywide protests.
- April 14- Police thrash photojournalists Sadaqat Mughal and Amjad Hussain who were covering a police operation against the TLP.
- April 20- Former Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority Chairman Absar Alam shot by an unidentified man in Islamabad.

5) Threats

2020

Seven incidents recorded.

- February 5- *Tribal News Network* correspondent Shah Nawaz Khan threatened by policemen for making a video of a fight between them and a rickshaw driver.
- February 11- *Geo News* reporter Asif Ali Bhatti received threatening calls from Afghanistan.
- February 29- *Tribal News Network* reporter Mehrab Shah Afridi received threatening phone calls by an unknown individual for his reports on social media in his hometown of Landi Kotal.
- April 8- *Daily Khabrain* journalist Noor Muhammad Buledi received threatening calls following a story on malpractice in a road construction project in Bajaur district.
- August 12- Women journalists issue a joint statement on attacks via social media.
- August 30- Investigative journalist Ahmad Noorani receives threats following reporting on the business fortunes of close relatives of a retired army officer.
- December 1- *K21 News* Bureau Chief Faiz Muhammad Buledi received threats from the private secretary of the Sindh Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah.

2021

Six incidents recorded.

- January 21- *Geo News* crime reporter Ahmed Faraz receives life threat by superintendent of police after covering news of a tweet by his wife, another superintendent.
- February 23- *Koh-e-Noor TV* reporters Muhammad Faisal Mirza and Malik Junaid threatened after airing story regarding PTI social media activist.
- February 25- *Geo News* cameraperson Sheraz Gardezi threatened by Azad Kashmir's DG local government after reporting on Bagh's underdeveloped areas.
- 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 24- *92 News* anchorperson and Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists Rana Azeem threatened by theatre actor Iftikhar Bhola following a story on theatre industry.
- March 31- *Daily Ash Sharq* crime reporter Ali Abbasi receives threats to his life.

6) Raids and Attacks

2020

Three incidents recorded.

- January 6- Writer Mohammed Hanif says his Urdu publisher's office was raided.
- July 27- Pakistan Rangers entered the Karachi Press Club (KPC) without permission of the club.
- September 15- Senior journalist Suhail Warraich's book removed from book stalls.

2021

One incident recorded.

- February 21- *Geo* and *Jang Media Group* offices in Karachi attacked by protesters.
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7) Restrictions on the Internet

2020

Two incidents recorded.

- July 1- Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) temporarily bans online game Players' Unknown Battle Ground (PUBG)
- October 9- PTA bans Tik Tok

2021

Three incidents recorded.

- March 11- PTA blocks Tik Tok following orders of the Peshawar High Court.
- April 16- Countrywide blackout on social media as PTA temporarily blocks sites to maintain public order and safety.

- April 24- NACTA says over 19,000 accounts taken down for inciting hate and spreading terrorism.

8) PEMRA directives and fines

2020

Fifteen incidents recorded.

- January 16- *ARY News* anchor Kashif Abbasi banned for 60 days.
- January 20- PEMRA bans *BoI TV* show *Champions* and host Waqar Zaka for airing objectionable content.
- February 1- *Channel 92* fined Rs1million for airing defamatory content against a special assistant to the Prime Minister Zulfikar Bukhari.
- March 6- PEMRA issues advisory on coverage of Aurat March, the annual Women's Day march held across Pakistan.
- April 17- PEMRA bans live audiences for Ramadan transmissions due to COVID-19.
- May 6- PEMRA suspends licence for *NEO TV*.
- June 25- PEMRA issues a directive for reporting and coverage of COVID-19.
- June 29- PEMRA issues notice to channels for "irresponsible coverage" of a terrorist attack on the Pakistan Stock Exchange in Karachi.
- June 29- PEMRA issues notice to private channels for reporting that Kuwait Airways had grounded Pakistani pilots and engineers.
- August 30- PEMRA suspends *24 News HD* licence.
- September 23- PEMRA issues notice to Gold Cable Network over illegal distribution of Indian channels and content on its network.
- October 1- PEMRA bans coverage of absconders.
- October 2- PEMRA bans coverage of the Lahore motorway rape case.
- October 5- PEMRA urges broadcasters/advertisers to refrain from using themes that do not correspond with the product.
- December 3 - Private TV channels issued show-cause notices for airing former finance minister and PML-N leader Ishaq Dar's interview.

2021

Seven incidents recorded.

- January 22- PEMRA suspends license of *BoI TV* and imposes Rs1 million fine.
- February 23- *TV One* sent notification regarding content aired in the drama *Dil Na Umeed to Nahi*.
- March 1- PEMRA serves show-cause notice to fourteen channels for airing "fake news" regarding increase in prices of petroleum products.
- March 24- PEMRA advises TV channels not to air unsubstantiated remarks about the National Accountability Bureau (NAB).
- April 12- PEMRA issues notice to *Express News* for airing irresponsible words on programme *Khabardar*.

- April 16- PEMRA bans coverage of now proscribed Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan.
- April 28- PEMRA asks TV channels to rely on information from the information minister or other cabinet members regarding decisions of cabinet meetings.

9) Legal Actions Against Media Outlets and Journalists

2020

Four incidents recorded.

- January 25- Anchorpersons Shahzeb Khanzada and Waseem Badami sent defamation notices by senior politician Jehangir Tareen.
- September 9- FIR registered against *Express Tribune* journalist Bilal Farooqi.
- September 11- FIR registered against former PEMRA Chairman Absar Alam
- September 12- FIR registered against journalist Asad Ali Toor

2021

Three incidents recorded.

- March 11- Case registered against journalist Ghulam Akbar Marwat in Lakki Marwat following story on corrupt practices in the food department.
- March 15- Case registered against four journalists in Sukkur while covering a sit-in.
- March 21- FIA summons former PEMRA chairman Absar Alam.
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10) Legislative Actions

2020

Five incidents recorded.

- January 28- Federal cabinet approves Citizens Protection (Against Online Harm) Rules, 2020
- July 22- The Punjab Assembly passes the 'Tahaffuz-e-Bunyad-e-Islam Bill 2020' granting inspection powers of printing presses.
- July 23- Punjab bans one hundred books being taught in private schools.
- September- Lawmaker belonging to the ruling Pakistan Tehreek Insaf party introduced the Criminal Law (Amendment Bill) 2020 in the National Assembly proposing anyone who was found engaging in intentional ridiculing and defaming of the armed forces of Pakistan or any of its members be penalized.
- November 18- Information technology ministry notifies Removal and Blocking of Unlawful Online Content (Procedure, Oversight and Safeguards) Rules 2020.

2021

One incident recorded.

- April 8- The interior's standing committee of the National Assembly approves a bill to amend the PPC and CrPC to take action against those who intentionally ridicule the armed forces.