Pakistan

Promised Breaks

The situation of media freedom in Pakistan is one of extreme concern. It has continued to deteriorate over the past few years and the change in government in 2022 did not provide the respite many had hoped it would.

In the period under review, over 90 separate cases of violations were recorded – murders, physical attacks, kidnappings, irregular wages, personal security, illegal terminations etc. continues in Pakistan.

Pakistan, partly arising from a seemingly intractable political crisis. While the shrinking of the formal media sector in Pakistan is partly due to a drastic squeeze on public sector advertising, the growth in online and social media is threatening traditional journalists with alternative models that are changing news output, revenue generation, audience consumption, and employment volumes.

The biggest casualties are in provincial media houses and reporters. The workers have shrunken by an estimated 45 per cent; from 20,000 three years ago to around 11,000 in 2023. With most newspapers worried about keeping their doors open, there is no sex equality in Pakistani journalism. A number of journalists have shifted to social media sites like Youtube to cover their journalism.

Bearing the brunt

In the period under review, at least 93 separate cases of violations were recorded against at least 75 journalists, including against at least five women and transgender journalists, and against several media establishments. These included the killing of five journalists, 19 attacks resulting in injuries against 36 journalists; five attacks against seven journalists; six incidents of threats against as many journalists; seven incidents of kidnapping of as many journalists; six arrests; four detentions without charges; 11 separate legal actions against 17 journalists and at least 16 instances in which 26 journalists were aggressively intimidated and stopped from their duties. In addition, two media establishments faced hostile actions and a blanket ban was placed by parliament against all journalists who operate on social media, such as Youtube.

Also documented were at least 11 separate instances of action against media houses and social media platforms by the electronic and internet media regulators. In December 2022, Pakistani journalists and rights activists called for an urgent need to check organised crime, which was gaining ground in the absence of effective laws to check the practice.

Another keyexample was the government’s positive move to register cases against journalists for free speech. In one instance alone, in May 2022, authorities registered multiple cases against several journalists and media workers. Among those cases, including a raid on the office of a radio station in Karachi, Sahib Shahi, Sami Ibrahim and Imran Bazzar – all media critics and close to Imran Khan – for allegedly posting ‘anti-state’ content.

On the positive side, the Sindh provincial government officially notified the formation of a special commission for the protection of journalists in December 2022. This raised hopes that journalists in Sindh could finally use the law to file complaints about threats to their safety. Media rights watchdog Freedom Network and the Sindh Journalists and Media Professionals’ Act, 2021, by the government of Bilawal Bhutto’s PPP party in 2021 was passed in late 2021, it has not been enforced.

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Precarious transition

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Controlling the airwaves

The Pakistan government’s obsession with controlling free speech and access to plural sources of information continued in the period under review. The restrictions continued to be used to curb free expression, as did attempts to introduce a new regulatory framework.

In February 2023, PTI announced the extension of the federal cabinet minuting new legislation amounting to a crackdown on social media activists involved in “defaming the armed forces and judiciary”. The cabinet eventually backed off after a split in opinion and agreed that existing laws should be invoked in the case of any new inciting content. In May 2022, the Islamabad High Court warned an attempt to bring in social media rules that impinged on civil liberties.

Other attempts at curtailing free speech continued. Internet and telecommunication regulator PTA said in January 2023 that it had blocked more than one million websites in 2022 alone. This is in addition to the fact that Pakistan has in the past few yearsfigured among the top five requesters to Twitter and Facebook for content removal. In October 2022, TikTok said it had removed more than 15 million videos posted from Pakistan.

In May 2022, the Lahore High Court warned Imran Khan’s party PTI to desist from uploading videos and opinion critical of the judiciary. In June, PTA issued a notice requiring all YouTube users to register with the authorities or risk punitive action. The government’s attempt to block YouTube services to prevent Imran Khan’s party followers from circulating videos critical of the government, military and judiciary. In September 2022, the Lahore High Court ordered a shutdown of the YouTube servers of the Pakistan Information Services (PTIS), which are owned by the PTI. In October 2022, internet regulator PTA issued a notice requiring all YouTube users to register with the authorities or risk punitive action.

In January 2023, the government had finally banned the entry of YouTubers, TikTokers and other social media influencers and access to plural sources of information continued in the period under review. The restrictions continued to be used to curb free expression, as did attempts to introduce a new regulatory framework.

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The data showed that around one in every five murdered journalists failed to get justice because police apparently did not complete the trial in the courts. The report also led an advocacy effort to lobby with political leaders, media houses and ministries.

Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif promised journalists in a tweet that his government would “fully implement” the federal law for the protection of journalists.

In terms of meeting its international obligations specifically dealing with the safety of journalists, a reporter measuring Pakistan’s progress in implementing the UN Plan of Action on Safety of Journalists and Issues of Impunity, was launched by IRADA at an international conference in Islamabad in December 2022 attended by Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif. The report said that Pakistan had partly delivered on promises to protect its journalist community, mostly through efforts by civil society, media and the UN since 2012, but emphasised the need to effectively implement new laws to ensure perpetration of attacks on journalists were held to account.

In February 2023, acting on court orders, PTA asked Wikipedia to remove some content alleged to be blasphemous and then banned it. The government had sought to remove some content alleged to be blasphemous and then banned it. The government had sought to remove some content alleged to be blasphemous and then banned it.

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Walking the talk on inclusion, the PFUJ accepted the membership of digital journalists and amended its constitution to allow working journalists who had lost their jobs to retain membership of the union or press club.

freedoms and safety of journalists. In its National Report, Pakistan touted the promulgation of the landmark Protection of Journalists and Media Professionals Act, 2021. It claimed that provincial governments had taken a proactive approach to safeguard journalists and investigate cases pertaining to human rights defenders and journalists. It said the Government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa adopted the Journalists Welfare Endowment Fund (Amendment) Act 2019 to provide for the welfare of veteran journalists aged 60 and above in case of, inter alia, death or injury. The Government of Punjab established a PKR 50 million (USD 180,000) fund to support affected journalists or their families with grants up to PKR 100,000 (USD 350). The Government of Balochistan established the Journalist Welfare Fund to compensate journalists for any serious injuries, and, in case of their death, to their family members.

Summarising the concerns of various stakeholders, including Pakistani civil society, the UN Office of the UNHCR indicated that the emphasis should be on media freedoms. Some of the demands from Pakistan included that the Protection of Journalists and Media Professionals Act be amended, in particular Section 6, to avoid broad and vague formulations that lack legal clarity and may be used to unlawfully restrict the right to freedom of expression. The Digital Rights Foundation stressed that safeguards should be implemented for protected speech by journalists and human rights defenders in online and offline spaces, particularly their right to speak critically of public figures and institutions. Group Joint Submission urged Pakistan to establish without independent commissions for the protection of journalists and media professionals to tackle impunity in crimes against journalists as required under the Protection of Journalists and Media Professionals Bill, 2021, and the Sindh Protection of Journalists and Other Media Practitioners Bill, 2021, and to establish and strengthen mechanisms for ensuring the safety of journalists, particularly women journalists and those from minority communities.

Countering disinformation

In the period under review, Pakistan continued to grapple with the disinformation problem affecting the media landscape. Media and civil society organisations have been negatively affected by online disinformation, which includes physical harm as well as psychological and reputational harm, especially to women journalists on social media. Only 10 per cent reported they had been provided with digital tools by their newsrooms. At least 70 per cent journalists indicated that they fact-checked their stories independently. A majority indicated they have not had any formal training on using digital fact-checking tools or newsverifying on social media. Most newsrooms surveyed said they were facing impediments to counter disinformation due to their gender identity.

The study also confirmed previous research findings that disinformation is threatening the work and safety environment of Pakistani digital journalists. Around 60 per cent of the journalists surveyed said that their risk of getting deceived by fake social media posts during online newsgathering. In addition, most women journalists (56 per cent) surveyed said that they had faced additional challenges to counter disinformation due to their gender identity. Over two-thirds of the digital journalists identified fact-checking training as their most urgent need to counter disinformation. The study also recommended the establishment of a ‘coalition against disinformation’ comprising journalist unions, academia, media houses and civil society to improve literacy on the subject.

In terms of regulation and action against disinformation, there were instances that demonstrated a desire to counter the more adverse impact of disinformation as well as a proclivity to hound journalists in the name of countering defamation. For instance, amid a political conflict between Pakistan’s political parties and military establishment, a UK-based Pakistani YouTube channel was blocked by the country’s telecommunication regulatory authority, as it was accused of inciting violence against politicians. The Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) blocked two fake Twitter handles associated with retired army officers and soldiers.

The online report also includes country reports for Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, as well as a list of jailed and detained journalists in South Asia and the list of media rights violations by Journalists’ Safety Indicators (JSI), May 2022 to April 2023. Front cover: Members of the Sri Lanka Council for Human Rights have been murdered in New Delhi, India. © AP/PTI

Council of the PFUJ accepted the membership of digital journalists and amended its constitution to allow working journalists who had lost their jobs to retain membership of the union or press club. Granting membership to young journalists and freelance journalists began, following a baseline survey of freelance journalists in Sindh province. A quarterly labour rights bulletin published by the IFJ was launched in 2022 to highlight success stories, communicate key developments in the media and review progress on labour rights reform action. In February 2023, the Commission for the Protection of Journalists and Other Media Practitioners (CPJMP), established by the government of Sindh province, agreed to collaborate with the Pakistan Journalists Union to identify fewer cases of attacks against journalists. The meeting agreed to adopt the UNESCO recommended ‘3P’ approach of prevention, protection and prosecution to combat impunity.

Several advocacy efforts and campaigns for justice for journalists killed and for safety of media practitioners were undertaken in Pakistan in the period under review. Each small step towards enhancing safety for journalists sends across a loud message: media workers matter.
Pakistan’s Political Crisis Impacting Digital Media Freedom

Amidst political instability and elections due in October, the escalating polarisation found new victims in digital media.

41% of cases of attacks on digital media in South Asia were reported in Pakistan.

The governments of both Imran Khan and Shahbaz Sharif failed to operationalize the Protection of Journalists and Media Professionals Act, 2021.

In 2022, internet and telecom regulator PTA blocked more than 1 million websites.

56% of female journalists said they were targeted by gendered disinformation campaigns.

In December 2022, law enforcement agencies arrested and charged 62 social media users for alleged blasphemy and hate speech.