



PAKISTAN DOWN BUT NOT OUT

Pakistan's media in 2019 reeled under an unrelenting clampdown, enduring repression which can be likened to 'waterboarding', or a form of slow torture as journalists struggled to survive physical attacks and threats to their livelihoods. Journalists, the basic source of news and information, remain as vulnerable as ever frequently targeted, harassed and even murdered. While the media is responsible for creating public awareness on national and international issues, there is no effective law governing the security and safety of journalists in Pakistan.

Measures taken by the government appeared to be aimed at gagging the minuscule free media, by perpetual clipping of its wings. Many believe that the recent censorship, intimidation and arm twisting of journalists and media has been worse than the decade under the dictatorial regime of General Zia-ul Haq in 1977.

MURDERS AND ATTACKS, WITH IMPUNITY

The rising number of cases of harassment has substituted the tapering off of murders in the recent years. Killings however, still pose a grave challenge for journalists, especially when almost all of the perpetrators have gotten away with impunity. Several journalists paid the ultimate price for their reporting.

A recent murder was that of Aziz Memon, a 56-year old journalist in Naushahro Feroze in Sindh province. Tragically, his frantic appeals on social media for safety could not save his life. Memon's body was found floating in a canal on February 16, 2020. According to witnesses who saw his body, Memon had been strangled with a wire before being drowned in the canal. However, the official autopsy report confirmed that he was murdered.

Weeks before his murder, Memon who worked with the Sindhi language channel KTN News and Sindhi-language

MANY BELIEVE THAT THE RECENT CENSORSHIP, INTIMIDATION AND ARM TWISTING OF JOURNALISTS AND MEDIA HAS BEEN WORSE THAN THE DECADE UNDER THE DICTATORIAL REGIME OF GENERAL ZIA-UL HAQ IN 1977.

Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan during the 74th Session of the General Assembly at UN Headquarters in New York on September 27, 2019. Measures taken by the Khan government appear to be aimed at gagging the minuscule free media, by perpetual clipping of its wings. CREDIT: TIMOTHY A. CLARY / AFP

Daily Kawish had fled to capital Islamabad, from Mehrabpur, his hometown. In a video message from Islamabad, Memon claimed that police were threatening him at the behest of a local politician of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP). He alleged that death threats were being hurled at him because of a story he broke on the KTN TV channel that showed the politician in bad light. Days later, his murder irrefutably validated his allegations.

The Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists (PFUJ) strongly protested Memon's murder and staged a sit-in across the province demanding an impartial and fair investigation into his murder. The protests yielded results and the government constituted a joint investigation team, and even dropped the officer who had shown partiality in the case.

In yet another gory murder, Javedullah Khan, bureau chief of the Urdu daily *Ausaf*, was shot by unidentified gunmen on February 25, 2020 in the Swat Valley in northern Pakistan.

Khan was a member of the government-formed Peace Committee in Swat to forge peace in the valley after the Taliban ouster from there following a military operation. It is believed that Khan's murder was pre-planned.

Zafar Abbas, a journalist associated with 7 News was murdered after being kidnapped and kept in captivity for five days. Police did not heed complaints of his kidnapping and swung into action only after Abbas' body was found dumped inside a dry well on September 16, 2019. Ali Sher Rajpar, 36, working for Sindhi language daily *Awami Awaz*, was shot dead on May 4, 2019 outside Pad Eidan Press Club, in southern Sindh province. Investigations revealed animosity towards Rajpar, who was a bold and vocal journalist. The perpetrator was arrested.

Mirza Waseem Baig, a reporter with 92 TV channel was shot dead outside his home on August 30, 2019. He was covering a local criminal gang involved in extortion in Sarai Alamgir, a bustling town in eastern Punjab province.

Muhammad Bilal Khan, a 22-year-old blogger and freelance journalist, known for his critical stances on Pakistan's powerful Inter-Services Intelligence Agency (ISI) and the military establishment, and murdered in Islamabad on June 23, 2019. He received an anonymous phone call and was asked to come to the nearby woods where unknown assailants fatally slew him with a dagger.

Urooj Iqbal, a female journalist was murdered by her husband in Lahore on November 25, 2019, after he demanded that she quit her job.

Impunity for the murders of journalists, arrests and threats continued in the year under review with blatant fudging of evidence in which the police were suspected to have a role. Police submitted a forged medical report trying to present the murder of journalist Aziz Memon as a natural death.


In a shocking judgement on April 2, 2020, provincial Sindh High Court overturned the death sentence of British-born Ahmed Omar Saeed Sheikh, who had been convicted by an anti-terrorism court for kidnapping and murdering US journalist Daniel Pearl in 2002. Pearl, the South Asia bureau chief of *Wall Street Journal* was working on a story on terrorism when he was kidnapped in Karachi and weeks later a video release shown him beheaded in custody of Islamic militants.

Omar along, with three other accomplices, was arrested and sentenced to death by hanging while the other three were awarded life imprisonment. The convicts filed an appeal in the high court that remained pending for 18 years. Expressing serious concern over the verdict of the High Court, the PFUJ also expressed hope that justice would be done. On April 4, the four accused in the case were re-arrested and detained for a period of three months, pending filing of the appeal against the acquittal.

BRAZEN ATTACKS

Journalists also encountered physical assaults and abuse during the year.

Mansoor Ali Siyal, an office bearer of the ruling Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) roughed up Imtiaz Khan Faran, the president of the Karachi Press Club during a live broadcast on June 28, 2019. The incident angered the journalist community which then staged a series of protests against the incident.



Khawja Naveed, the defence lawyer of Omar Sheikh, speaks to media representatives after the court commuted Sheikh's death sentence on April 2, 2020 in Karachi. Sheikh was previously given a death sentence for the 2002 killing of American journalist Daniel Pearl. CREDIT: ASIF HASSAN / AFP

IN A SHOCKING JUDGEMENT ON APRIL 2, 2020, PROVINCIAL SINDH HIGH COURT COMMUTED THE DEATH SENTENCE OF BRITISH-BORN AHMED OMAR SAEED SHEIKH, WHO HAD BEEN CONVICTED BY AN ANTI-TERRORISM COURT FOR KIDNAPPING AND MURDERING US JOURNALIST DANIEL PEARL IN 2002.

However, no legal action was taken against the politician. The lack of accountability reinforced an atmosphere of impunity and in January 2020, Fawad Chaudhry, minister of the Khan cabinet slapped Mubashir Luqman, a TV anchor, for his comments on a political issue.

In Faisalabad, the third largest city of Pakistan, on July 23, 2019 lawyers kidnapped and savagely beat up two journalists of 24 TV Channel who were covering a protest by lawyers.

Several journalists were injured when the police in Pakistan-administered Kashmir, raided, fired tear gas shells and charged journalists with batons in the Muzaffarabad Press Club in October 2019. The raid came when leaders of Jammu Kashmir Peoples National Alliance were scheduled to hold a press conference.

In July two journalists in the eastern Punjab province were assaulted in separate incidents. Shaikh Rizwan, a reporter working for Urdu daily *Khabrain* in Sargodha town was badly beaten up by local land mafia. Bashir Malik, associated with 24 TV Channel in Khushab town of the province was also beaten.

The home of Shahid Sultan, reporter with *Jang*, was raided in May. In the raid during the wee hours, the police held the journalist and his two sons at gun point, searched his home in the garrison city of Rawalpindi without authorisation and then mysteriously left.

TABOO TOPICS

In continuation of the previous year's arbitrary measures, censorship was intensified by the regulatory bodies as well as the establishment through formal and informal tactics.

In July, 2019 so-called paid platoons of social media "warriors" launched a vicious hashtag campaign "ArrestAntiPakistanJournalists," after two broadcast journalists Hamid Mir and Asma Shirazi made critical comments about Prime Minister Khan's policies.

Through the year, all the mainstream media, especially the electronic media, regularly received 'advisories' from the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA), widely believed to be emanating from military intelligence, the Inter Services Public Relations wing.

Besides day to day instructions, certain issues were deemed to be off-limits for the media. There has been a permanent ban on covering rallies and activities of the Pakhtun Tahafuz (protection) Movement (PTM), a group of ethnic Pakhtuns that emerged in recent years to protect basic rights and stop the high-handedness of the security forces in the North Western region of Pakistan. Having complete control on the local media, the military establishment has reportedly been pressurising the foreign media as well to stop coverage of the PTM.

In the western province of Balochistan, the ethnic Baloch, struggling for broader autonomy of the province and securing

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JOURNALISM AND EDUCATION



Pakistani journalist, Hamid Mir, journalist and members of the jury, speaks during the Guillermo Cano World Press Freedom Prize ceremony in Ethiopia on May 2, 2019. Mir has been increasingly victimised under Imran Khan's government and in anti-media campaigns. CREDIT: ADUARDO SOTERAS / AFP

their rights, have also been banned in the media. Most parts of the province have been inaccessible for the foreign as well as local media to do independent stories.

Altaf Hussain, the founder leader of Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM), that ruled Pakistan's Karachi for three decades was also banned in coverage by all media, print, online and electronic.

In another form of censorship, Dawn TV transmissions remained off air in vast swathes of the cantonment residential areas, which administration is run by the retired or serving military personnel. Hawkers were also barred from distributing Dawn newspapers in many parts of the country.

In Karachi, on January 9, 2020, plain-clothed personnel raided a publishing house, Maktaba-e-Danyal, and confiscated all the copies of Urdu translation of the award-winning English novel 'A Case of Exploding Mangoes.' Mohammad Hanif, a senior journalist and writer, had authored the satirical book about military dictator Zia-ul Haq, who was killed in an air crash in 1988, which the book attributed to explosives planted in the mango boxes aboard. Those conducting the raid identified themselves as ISI personnel and took away all the copies of the book. The raid left Hanif feeling "anxious, angry and above all helpless," as he was quoted in the media.

Enforced disappearance of political and right activists has also been a taboo topic for the local media. Hundreds of Pakistani political and rights activists have been 'missing' for years and the court cases continue at snail pace.

In another glaring example of censorship, an interview of former Pakistani president Asif Ali Zardari was taken off air on July 5, 2019, at the eleventh hour. Hamid Mir, the veteran journalist who interviewed Zardari for Geo TV was later invited to 'Zara Hat Ka', a Dawn TV current affair programme to

explain the circumstances led to the interview ban but the hosts of 'Zara Hat Ka' were also told not to interview Mir.

On July 6, several TV channels were taken off air after they broadcast the live speech of Maryam Nawaz Sharif, the daughter of former prime minister Nawaz Sharif and leader of Pakistan Muslim League, the main opposition party of the country.

In the same month Geo TV transmissions were taken off air in many parts of the country and the number of transmissions were reduced during prime minister Imran Khan visit to the US.

In November, PEMRA issued notifications to all the TV channels ordering them to ban their current affair programs hosts and anchors from making critical comments or expressing their views.

TIGHTENING THE LEGAL LOOSE

In what was believed to be an attempt to clamp down on media, Nasrullah Chaudhry, a local journalist, was sentenced to five years' imprisonment under the Anti-terrorist Act. Chaudhry was arrested in November 2019 following a raid of his house by the security forces. The prosecution charged him with possessing prohibited jihadi literature. The IFJ demanded that the government refrain from using court processes to silence independent media. On April 9, 2020, the Sindh High Court acquitted Nasrullah Chaudhry and ordered his immediate release from jail.

While the government of Imran Khan has been taking every opportunity to curb the media under the existing legal framework, it has been actively engaged in forging new media laws that could further tighten its grip on the media.

At a press conference by Pakistan's information minister Firdous Ashiq Awan on September 17, the government made

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public its intention to set up speedy media courts and replace the existing regulatory bodies by a single body named the Pakistan Media Regulatory Authority.

The journalist community fiercely opposed the proposal. The draft of the law was directly submitted to the cabinet without circulating it among stakeholders, including journalists. The cabinet report included more stringent clauses aimed at curtailing free speech, access to information and controlling social media. Besides PFUJ, civil society and rights groups also opposed the idea. The draft seems to have been put on the back burner but not totally shelved.

In February the cabinet of the government approved a law to curb the vibrant social media in the country. The Citizen Protection (Against Online Harms) Rules required all the social media companies including YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok to necessarily register their offices in Islamabad within three months.

Key clauses of the proposed law included:

- a. Establishment of an office of a national coordinator responsible for content, regulation, advising the government and engaging with the social media companies.
- b. Social media platforms would be required to remove any unlawful content pointed out to them in writing or electronically, within 24 hours and in emergency cases within six hours.
- c. If the company fails to abide by the provision, all platforms, applications and services run by the company may be blocked or face penalty of five million rupees (USD 32,000).
- d. The companies would be bound to provide to the regulator the decrypted, readable content and any other information about the users on the demand of the authorities.
- e. Social media companies will have to establish their registered offices in Islamabad.

The government had to retreat on the implementation. However, it has constituted a committee in March that would redraw the law in consultation with representatives of the social media companies. Journalists have no representation on the committee.

The Asia Internet Coalition (AIC) that represents Google, Amazon, Facebook and Twitter among others, rejected outright the Citizen Protection (Against Online Harms) Rules saying they would rather wind up their operations in Pakistan.

The PFUJ also rejected the new law, denouncing the government action through statements and protest actions.

In yet another attack, the government made Pakistan Media Council dysfunctional by sacking dozens of its employees in early March. The Council, having a fair representation of the journalist community, members of civil society and government functionaries, although toothless, did provide some support for journalists in protecting their rights.

GROWING ECONOMIC CRISIS

An economic siege of the media was conducted by the government – the largest revenue source for both the electronic and print media – by stopping the release of advertisements to newspapers and TV channels. *Dawn* newspaper, Pakistan's

most prestigious and independent English daily was denied government advertisements, which deprived the newspaper of a large part of its revenue, inflicting serious financial hardships on journalists and media workers. The economic squeeze followed after *Dawn* published news regarding the country's powerful military establishment's role in imparting diktats to the civilian government.

So it was with Geo TV and Jang Group of newspapers, the largest media company that managed to give space to voices of dissent and opposition, thus displeasing the government and military establishment.

In retaliation, the government held back payment of about 5.6 billion rupees (USD 33 million) which it owed to the newspapers and TV channels. Non-payment of dues created a severe cash flow problem for media organisations which they cold-bloodedly passed on to hard-pressed journalists and other media employees through lay-offs and pay cuts.

This intervention posed multiple challenges to journalists and the larger community of media workers desperately trying to save their jobs, survive massive salary cuts and months-long backlog of payments. The media houses also competed in not paying salaries in a timely manner; almost 90 per cent of the media houses and newspapers were owing at least three months' pay.

Untimely deaths of working journalists were reported during the year which could be linked to the non-payment of wages and the resulting stress of paying their bills, school fees and feeding their families. On May 29, Idress Bakhtiar, a seasoned journalist, associated with Geo TV, died after months of being laid off. Fasi ur Rehman, a 47-year journalist of Geo TV, Islamabad, died in February 2020 of a heart attack as salaries were still pending. Hasan Mansoor, a senior journalist associated with daily *Dawn*, died of heart failure at the age of 54.

NewsOne TV channel was among one such media house, holding back its employees' salaries from three to six months. In some cases, the resulting financial stress was lethal. One tragic example is that of SM Irfan, a dynamic reporter in his 30s, who suddenly died leaving his wife and children in a dire financial crisis. PFUJ local leaders staged a protest outside the NewsOne office to condemn Irfan's death. The management was compelled to enter into an agreement with the PFUJ leaders and its employees, immediately paying dues to Irfan's family and releasing the salaries of the other employees.

Frequent layoffs, which marred the media industry in 2018 continued this year as many media houses and newspapers fired hundreds of journalists. The number of the fired journalists and workers in the Jang and Geo group touched almost 1000 but it could be higher as many were employed through 'the third-party contract' a tactic by the owners to flout the direct employment obligations. The management of Geo TV, owned by the Jang Group, the largest Pakistani media house has failed to pay salaries for up to three months. Protests by the PFUJ seemed to be falling on deaf ears. The dire situation also impacted the struggle for press freedom by the journalist community.

The media community was somewhat divided on its stand against the arrest of Mir Shakil-ur-Rehman, owner and editor-in-chief of the Jang group, who has been under remand



Police officials escort arrested Mir Shakil-ur-Rehman (top) the editor-in-chief of the Jang Group, outside National Accountability Bureau (NAB) court in Lahore on March 13, 2020. Mir is accused of scoring illegal concessions in the purchase of land dating back to 1986 but his representatives said it is retaliation following the broadcast of several investigative programs. CREDIT: ARIF ALI / AFP

of the National Accountability Bureau (NAB), official anti-corruption agency. Rehman's arrest on March 12, 2020, in a property dispute case dating back to 1986, is seen as a part of the government attempts to clip press freedom. But struggling working journalists want salaries to be paid and exploitative employment conditions at the Jang Group to end even as they protest against Rehman's arrest. The group had closed down several of its publications, affecting scores of media workers.

Nawaiwaqt Group, the oldest media house of the country, shut down its Waqt TV channel, rendering all its staff jobless. It also laid off dozens of employees from *Nawaiwaqt* Urdu daily and did not pay their dues. About one thousand journalists and media staff were struggling to get justice from the courts of law but in vain. PFUJ staged several protests in solidarity with the employees, many of whom were in a very bad financial condition.

The comparatively new company Bol TV, laid off more than 600 employees. Bol TV management went to the extent of filing cases against the protesting employees under the Anti-Terrorism Act of Pakistan. All of them were denied their dues but the management had to pay the dues to about half of the employees on the intervention of the court.

Express Media Group, ARY Group and several other organisations also followed the course and terminated the services of many dozens of employees.

Ummat, an Urdu daily has been failing to pay salaries to its employees for around a year. The beleaguered staff of the defaulting media organisations too often choose not to pursue action in court for fear of losing their jobs altogether. They also refrain from joining protest calls from unions for the same reason.

To add to the mounting wage problems, most working journalists have been denied their rights of forming their union

to elect combined bargaining agent (CBA). Among hundreds of newspapers and media houses only two CBAs exist in Jang Group and Dawn Newspapers. Absence and weakening of existing unions has created an environment that has left journalists in the hands of powerful media owners, who largely dictate their terms of employment.

PFUJ and its affiliate regional unions in the big cities try to fill in the gap of CBAs. The union fought for more than a decade for the revision of wages under the constitutional Wage Award Commission. After a laborious and protracted union struggle, the notification regarding new wages under the Wage Award Commission was issued in February 2020.

In light of the deteriorating working conditions of media workers in the country, "Mission Pakistan 2020", IFJ deputy secretary general Jeremy Dear made a visit to Lahore and Karachi in February to gain first-hand knowledge of the issues of working journalists and media workers.

Unpaid salaries, unlawful downsizing, security and impunity were the focus of the IFJ's five-day mission. In meetings with provincial government ministers, regional governors, editors, officials of the Council of Pakistan News Paper Editors (CPNE) officials and senior journalists and journalists' union representatives from more than 20 cities, the IFJ reiterated PFUJ's demands for urgent action to resolve the pay crisis and to stop thousands of 'unlawful' job cuts in media houses.

A resolution adopted during the IFJ mission emphasised the right to freedom of expression; ending impunity for killings and attacks of journalists; and the all-important issue of job security and decent wages for working journalists. The possibility of taking up the issue of international agencies such as the UN and ILO was also discussed. Overall, the Mission served to strengthen international solidarity with working journalists and media workers of Pakistan.



Demonstrators attend an anti-Imran Khan protest rally in Quetta on July 25, 2019, observing “Black Day”, one year after the election that elected Imran Khan, Prime Minister of Pakistan.

CREDIT: BANARAS KHAN / AFP

A RESOLUTION ADOPTED DURING THE IFJ MISSION EMPHASISED THE RIGHT TO FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION; ENDING IMPUNITY FOR KILLINGS AND ATTACKS OF JOURNALISTS; AND THE ALL-IMPORTANT ISSUE OF JOB SECURITY AND DECENT WAGES FOR WORKING JOURNALISTS.

INSECURE AND UNSAFE

Women journalists at media houses are visibly discriminated. They not only draw lower salaries than their male colleagues but also have to endure sexual harassment at the workplace. Some media houses have formally set up a mandatory committee to protect women media workers from sexual harassment but many do not know about the very existence of such committees.

The vernacular media has grown in leaps and bounds in Pakistan in the past two decades but its freedom is restricted and they work in extremely precarious conditions.

The government of former prime minister Nawaz Sharif had drafted a law for the protection of journalists but it could not be tabled in the parliament and approved. The present government has also drawn up a draft bill in recent weeks but how seriously it would pursue turning it into a law, is yet to be seen.

The proposed ‘Protection of Journalists and Media Professionals Act, 2020’ aims to protect every journalist’s right to life and security which is guaranteed in Article 9, of the Constitution of Pakistan. Appropriate action is to be taken if any journalist is subjected to ill treatment.

The draft also suggests that to maintain independence, impartiality and freedom of journalists and media professionals, the government would take steps to ensure that existing or future counter terrorism or national security laws are not utilised arbitrarily to hinder the work and safety of journalists.

The formation of a Commission for the Protection

of Journalist and Media Professionals (CPJMP) has also been suggested, comprising a judge of the Supreme Court as chairman; four members nominated by the PFUJ, a representative of the National Press Club Islamabad and an ex officio representative from the Human Rights Ministry.

Too often Pakistan’s media houses did not given concern to imparting hostile environment training to journalists working in difficult areas. They continued to deploy journalists covering the most sensitive stories of Covid-19 in early 2020, with at least three journalists reported as being infected with the coronavirus in March and one death by April.

A random telephone survey revealed that media organisations had left staff with minimal protective measures, which rendered journalists vulnerable to the pandemic.

In the office of the Centuries Publication, owner of Express TV and newspaper, arrangements were made for screening entrants for any fever, while sanitising liquids and surgical masks were placed in the premises. The masks were not meant to prevent virus but filter dust and smoke. The screening team was put in place to ensure that if someone had a temperature above normal 97 F, he or she was told to go back home. A cameraman was tested suffering more than 100 degree (F) fever, but was allowed to work on his insistence because he was more concerned about losing the job than being caught by Covid-19.

At Ab Takk TV, a producer was fired for not coming to work due to ill health. The management placed sanitizers at different spots but did not cancel the practise of bio-metric recording of attendance which could potentially be a prime source of the



Parents and relatives of Pakistani students stuck in Wuhan, China, video call their children during a protest in Islamabad on February 19, 2020. The families demanded that the Pakistan government increase its efforts to evacuate citizens from Wuhan, where the Covid-19 outbreak began.

CREDIT: AAMIR QURESHI / AFP

virus. No personal protective equipment (PPE) was issued to journalists and staff, though working shifts were reshuffled to loosely comply with the protective measure.

ARY TV channels, one of the largest media houses in the country was lax about providing PPE, especially, to the field staff, though they managed to fumigate the office premises. Several reporters registered the management with complaints of inhuman working conditions amid the pandemic but of no use.

After a successful dialogue with the PFUJ, Punjab Information Minister Fayyazul Hassan Chohan on April 10, 2020, announced a relief package for media workers in the wake of the massive industry fallout that followed the Covid-19 pandemic. The provincial information ministry has now agreed to pay a monthly pension of Rs 10,000 (USD 60) and Rs1 million (USD 5,980) in relief to the family of a journalist who dies due to Covid-19. The government will also pay Rs 100,000 (USD 600) to any journalist who contracts Covid-19.

Masks and protective gear will also be provided to newspaper hawkers. In response to the pandemic, the Punjab government announced it will give tax exemptions to media houses to clear pending dues so that they don't have to face financial losses due to the ongoing coronavirus situation. It is hoped that the relief of tax exemption and payment of dues would also reach media workers.

LOCKED DOWN AND CENSORED

The prevailing hostile circumstances pose a very serious question to the future of the free media in the country. The media in Pakistan has remained vibrant since independence in 1947 from the British Raj. The media has bravely faced three military dictatorships and imposition of emergencies by

civilian governments. Nevertheless, the present years have been considered the most hostile for the free media in the country.

The global coronavirus pandemic has brought fresh challenges to the media in Pakistan. There is built-in censorship amid the mandatory social distancing norms and physical lockdown during which journalists have restricted mobility and most are working from their homes. Reporters are forced to rely on official version alone, without sufficient scope for verification in an opaque system of governance. For instance, there are thousands of members of the missionary group Tablighi Jamaat, who had gathered in mid-March at Raiwind, the main congregation facility and headquarters of the Jamaat in Punjab province. They then dispersed all over the country. The numbers of those involved is said to be around 25,000, but in the initial days of the pandemic, there was no clear picture or official information about the whereabouts of all those who attended the gathering in Raiwind. Rumours and fake news took the place of verified information. Some newspapers reported that a member of the ruling PTI was arrested in Chitral, a remote town in Pakistan's north, for spreading fake news on social media.

Voices questioning the government have frequently been snubbed. Prime Minister Khan in a press conference on March 24, 2020, dismissed a journalist's question regarding his government's inefficient response to the emergency in the country. Instead of replying to the question Khan boasted about his government's 'media friendly' policy, claiming that the journalist would have faced a libel case and his organisation would have been shut down, had this question been asked in a Western country.

Governments must realise that critical questions, factual accuracy and ethical journalism are powerful tools in battling misinformation and vital to containing the pandemic.