

# PAKISTAN FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND MEDIA REPORT 2024

Erosion of free speech: The silencing of  
citizens, political parties and media

May 3, 2024 – World Press Freedom Day

Adnan Rehmat





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### **Description of this report:**

An annual trend analysis of the state of freedom of expression and media rights and freedoms in Pakistan. Released every year on May 3 – the World Press Freedom Day. The analysis incorporates Pakistan’s socio-political-legal and media industry related factors and developments impacting on exercise of Article 19 (freedom of expression) by the public and by media and its practitioners, and the impact of these developments on professional and public interest journalism. Ultimately the report provides insights into the concerns, challenges and triumphs experienced by media, social and political communities of Pakistan in the period under review.

### **Acknowledgement:**

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## Executive Summary

# Free speech right of citizens, political parties and media in Pakistan erode significantly

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*This chapter provides an overview of the freedom of expression and media freedoms situation in Pakistan prevalent during the period May 2023 to April 2024.*

Reduced tolerance for online dissent, especially stemming from political activity and free speech by citizens and journalists, shutting down mobile networks on election day, throttling of internet access, forced suspension of a popular key social media platform known as a dissent medium, and a raft of attacks and harassment of journalists and bloggers, including the murder of four journalists, significantly eroded the parameters of general freedom of expression in Pakistan during 2023 as well as enhancing the risks for media freedoms.

Approval by the federal cabinet of two draft laws – the E-Safety Bill and the Personal Data Protection Bill – aim for hardening stated policies of the last few years for formal and coercive regulation of content and proposing draconian structures to make this possible. Processed mostly secretly without open consultations with key stakeholders or even sharing of definitive drafts, these steps constitute a major backslide in freedom of expression and media freedoms online and digital rights in Pakistan.

Acute political polarization and governance and economic instability saw three governments in the one year between May 2023 and April 2024 in Pakistan. Through their actions all three ruling dispensations seemed to have evolved an alarming consensus among its most powerful political and state figures to lower their threshold of tolerance to freedom of expression, particularly online dissent.

Strong statements by key ruling officials against the often-bitter dissent expressed through social media by their critics – notably by supporters of one political party and some freelance online journalists and bloggers – over



this period indicates a growing formalization of intent to prosecute both the messenger of bad news and the mediums through which they are articulated.

A crackdown in this period saw dozens of journalists and bloggers slapped with legal notices, some being arrested, and others attacked and aggressively intimidated. Political workers also came in the dragnet. All this transpired against a backdrop of warnings by high officials, including top government office holders, followed by regular targeting of online expression. Consider some statements:

- “Social media campaign against the army does not fall under the category of freedom of expression. It is a conspiracy which should be crushed with force,” Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif, as reported by The Nation daily, from a statement issued in Islamabad on July 9, 2023.
- “Social media is being used to create an environment of chaos, despair and panic. Through fake news, an impression is being created that the state is losing its writ,” Army Chief general Asim Munir, as reported by The News, from an address to a convention of farmers in Islamabad, on December 30, 2023.
- “People should use social media responsibly as the anti-state use of social media will not be tolerated,” Federal Information and Broadcasting Minister Ataullah Tarar, as reported by ARY News channel, from a press conference in Lahore on March 17, 2024.
- “The more you lie, the more it sells on social media.” “Dollars are being earned by false allegations against the judiciary,” Chief Justice of Pakistan Qazi Faiz Isa, as reported by Express Tribune and The News dailies, from a hearing of a case in the Supreme Court of Pakistan in Islamabad on April 2, 2024.
- “Unfounded and baseless allegations [against armed forces] have become a fashion. [This] malicious propaganda is part of a sinister design to divide the masses and the armed forces. [Such efforts] would not be allowed to succeed and as per the law and constitution, stern action will be ensured,” Dawn newspaper on April 17 quoted from a meeting of corps commanders of the army.

These statements and a general crackdown – and other predatory actions by non-state actors – saw over 200 journalists, bloggers and other online information practitioners targeted by way of over 70 legal notices served

to them. Many came consequent to a ‘joint investigation team’ of various government departments tasked with identifying persons allegedly running a smear campaign against some judges although the chief justice later said he was not a complainant, and that the judiciary was being used to target free expression aimed at others.

### **Adverse policy actions:**

The following key developments indicate the operationalization of state intent to weaponize regulations of content online, particularly on social media platforms, including political, journalistic and social expression:

- **Coercive regulation:** The statements of high officials also hinted at the intentions of the government of ruling party, Pakistan Muslim League-N (PML-N), elected to office in February 2024 elections, to fast-track an alarming unfinished agenda from its previous government. In the dying days of its last government in August 2023, the cabinet approved the ‘E-Safety Bill’, which among other things aims at establishing a special authority to regulate free expression online and weaponize coercive content regulation on social media platforms, including, but not limited to, Facebook, YouTube, X (formerly Twitter) and WhatsApp. The government wanted to bulldoze the bill through parliament into law in late July 2023 but ran out of time when its tenure constitutionally ended. This ‘unfinished business’ is expected to be pursued by the federal government minister – under the same ruling party PML-N –with vigor after Senate elections and establishments of parliamentary committees in April 2024. Along with the E-Safety Bill, the cabinet also approved the Personal Data Protection [PDP] Bill which basically aims to force tech corporations – both social media platforms and e-commerce and other online service providers – to establish local offices and share data on its consumers with the government, as well as forcing on them local laws on censorship.
- **Weaponizing regulation:** Approval of these bills by the 2022-23 government of Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and early statements and indicators from the government of PM Sharif elected in February 2024 indicate real and present dangers for freedom of expression and media as well as digital rights in Pakistan. Attempts are clearly afoot to regulate not only content on social media but also online services and digital commerce, indicating that the government is readying to shift gears from informal coercive regulation to weaponization of regulation by structuralizing it through these bills.

- **Structuralizing regulation:** In April 2024 media reports revealed that the government of Azad Kashmir (AJK) had kicked off the process in Pakistan of organized social media content regulation by establishing ‘content monitoring committees’ (CMCs) to be managed by the territory’s Home Department. Notified in March 2024, the CMCs have been mandated with monitoring social media to identify social media users ‘vilifying, defaming or blackmailing’ public figures, including government officials and serving and retired security officials. The CMCs will reportedly be authorized to nominate a first information report (FIR) with the local relevant police station for action against any offending social media content/upload. Both journalistic content – comprising news, opinion and analysis – and non-media socio-political expression will be cognizable.

## Major failures:

Key state actions and targeting of other journalists and free speech practitioners by non-state actors that reversed the freedom of expression dial in Pakistan in the period under review included:

- **Network shutdowns:** A near-universal suspension across the country of mobile phone services on February 8, 2024 – the day over 125 million registered voters had to elect national and provincial legislatures. This suppressed two constitutional rights – access to information and freedom of expression – on the most important date of the national democratic cycle.
- **Social media suspensions:** The undeclared suspension of X (formerly Twitter) on February 17, 2024, which ran into several weeks until the writing of this report. This punished millions of users for the alleged transgressions of a few, hurting access to information as well as the digital economy.
- **Murders of journalists:** Four journalists were murdered – Jan Muhammad Mahar of Kawish TV in Sukkur, Ghulam Asghar Khand of Sobh News in Khairpur, Imtiaz Baig of Samaa TV in Jhelum and Sagheer Ahmed Laar of Khabrain in Khanpur – in the period under review. This sustains an extended chilling effect on public interest journalism and media freedoms of political expression by inducing self-censorship.
- **Press freedom violations:** At least 104 cases of violations – including murder, attacks, injuries, kidnapping, threats and legal cases – were documented by Freedom Network from May 2023 to March 2024 against

journalists and other media practitioners. Sindh was the riskiest region for journalists and content producers with 33% of the violations (34 out of total 104 cases) recorded there; Islamabad was the second most dangerous region (26% cases) followed by Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (23% or 24 cases), Punjab (12% or 13 cases), Balochistan (4% or 4 cases) and AJK (2% or 2 cases). The TV medium emerged as the prime journalism target with at least 59 (57%) of the 104 victims working for TV. Print media journalists were the second biggest target with 35 of its practitioners as victims (33%) while nine cases (9%) were of journalists who worked for digital media. One radio journalist was also attacked – an Afghan journalist in exile in Islamabad who survived an injurious assassination attempt.

- **Impunity:** The continued failure to establish the safety commission mandated by The Protection of Journalists and Media Professional Act, despite passage of the law in 2021, prolonged the state of near-total impunity of crimes against journalists, thereby affecting media freedoms. While the federal government in April 2024 advertised a hunt for a chairperson of the safety commission to be set up under its law, no final decision on the appointment was made.. The safety commission established under the Sindh Protection of Journalists and Other Practitioners Act, 2021, while notified in early 2023, remained without an office, budget or staff well into 2024, hampering its ability to protect journalists and thereby perpetuate impunity. Former Sindh High Court judge Rasheed A Rizvi, who was appointed chairperson of the Sindh safety commission, passed away in early 2024 and was succeeded by another retired Sindh High Court judge, Nazar Akbar.

### Small successes:

There were small victories in the struggle against keeping freedom of expression from totally becoming swamped by ill intent and action. Several actions by the courts helped journalists and citizens exercising their right to free speech and civic spaces open. These included:

- The Supreme Court of Pakistan, acting in January 2024 on a joint petition filed by the associations of journalists that report from the Supreme Court and the Islamabad High Court, ordered the Federal Investigations Agency (FIA) to suspend notices issued to journalists.
- The Lahore High Court in November 2023 quashed a case against a journalist charged with hate speech and sedition.

- In February and April 2024, the Sindh High Court and Islamabad High Court, respectively, ordered the suspension of social media platform X to be revoked to allow the public to use it.
- In April, telecom and internet regulator Pakistan Telecommunications Authority (PTA) said it was readying to increase digital and internet connectivity in the under-served areas by expanding data class value added services authorization to access providers.
- In December 2023, a woman TV journalist got some relief from the Islamabad High Court, which ordered a news channel to air an apology for defaming her and pay her a fine of Rs50,000 as compensation.

## Chapter 1

# State of health of Pakistani media industry (print, electronic, digital)

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*This chapter examines developments related to the general status of media closures and expansion (including updated figures from media regulators); the state of legacy media; challenges for periphery media; challenges related to media business viability, advertising industry and public funds.*

### Size of media industry:

By end April 2024, a total of 140 native TV channels held licenses issued by the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA), including around 45 current affairs/news channels. A total of 35 foreign TV channels issued landing rights by PEMRA were also operational. There were 26 IPTV (internet protocol television) companies licensed by PEMRA. There were also 175 native commercial FM stations and 60 non-commercial FM radio stations licensed by PEMRA. By end of 2023, a total of 1,343 print dailies were registered with the Audit Bureau of Circulation (ABC) of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting.

### Industry turmoil:

The turmoil roiling media industry in Pakistan for several years now continues including the media grappling with a lack of precise economic data while contending with persistent media business viability challenges affected by such diverse factors as wage reductions, job cuts, sluggish technological advancements, and shrinking advertising budgets from both governmental and corporate entities. Even government-managed media is struggling – some state-run radio stations in Sindh said in 2023 a lack of repairs was reducing broadcast ranges of transmitters while staff in other regions faced wage arrears. These issues continue to cast a shadow over journalists and established media organizations, including the largest media houses.

### Advertising debts:

One key reason of the turmoil are unpaid dues owed to the media industry. The

challenges confronting Pakistan's traditional media sector are exacerbated by mounting advertising debts. Despite assurances of payment settlements and promises of increased advertising rates, government agencies' influence has hindered the efficient functioning of media outlets. Notably, in August 2023, the government acceded to a 35% increase in government advertisement rates for print media following demands from the All Pakistan Newspaper Society (APNS). In September 2023 the government told the Senate it had disbursed about Rs. 9.5 billion in arrears to various media houses.

### **Job losses and wage cuts:**

For another year journalists remained confronted with the grim reality of layoffs and uncertain future prospects. A 'Decent Work Survey' conducted by the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) in 2023 in Sindh underscored the dire labor conditions prevailing in the industry revealing that around 40% of journalists surveyed were employed, with barely 30% holding fixed-term contracts. Around 60% reported non-renewal of contracts on an annual basis, while only about a third reported opportunities for career advancement. Most surveyed voiced grievances about overdue wage payments, excessive workloads and inadequate compensation.

### **Viability wobble for legacy media:**

In early 2024 the management of Talon TV announced it was closing operations due to dwindling revenues and its inability to pay its staff, with prospects of its dozens of staff being added to the growing lists of journalists without jobs in Pakistan. The channel was rescued at the eleventh hour with a change in ownership allowing its operations to resume after a week of suspension.

### **Small viability victories for periphery independent digital media:**

In recent years an ecosystem of independent community news media start-ups have risen in Pakistan. These are characterized by their servicing of audiences in the periphery and sub-urban areas, along with mainstream urban demography, and offering of news and perspectives that are missed out largescale by legacy media. The largest group of such start-ups is served by the Digital Media Alliance of Pakistan (DigiMAP), which by April 2024 had a membership of over 50 news platforms.

Some periphery media viability success stories:

- **Community journalism:** In 2023, six member news organizations of DigiMAP published at least 60 news stories altogether on the rights of marginalized communities including religious minorities. The news stories

not only covered issues such as forced conversions, religious persecution, employment, heritage preservation and enforcement of laws and policies on the one hand, but also celebrated the achievements of minorities in the fields of sports, media, and the arts on the other hand. The journalists and content producers who contributed these articles felt their own skill and competence also improved during the reporting process. Around 88% of the contributing journalists and content producers said the quality of their public interest journalism improved as a result and their own understanding of the issues faced by marginalized communities increased. The contributors had received training and mentorship from IMS and its partner civil society organization IRADA for the content production.

- **Audience engagement and viability of periphery media:** The digital media outlet, Damaan TV, which serves local audiences in the remote southern districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, doubled its online audience engagement after applying strategies to determine the information needs of the media outlet's audience. Between August and November 2023, Damaan TV increased its organic online reach by 50% to 1.5 million audience members and its organic post engagement by 95% to 0.49 million users. The increased engagement is expected to help Damaan TV improve the viability of its news operations. It was supported by IMS and its partner Freedom Network through a media viability training workshop where audience growth strategies were discussed. In September 2023, Damaan TV also brought honor and recognition to Pakistani hyperlocal media when it was selected for the prestigious International Press Institute (IPI) local news accelerator. Damaan TV was one of only 12 local media outlets from around the Global Majority countries selected after a competitive process that involved around 150 applications.
- **Local media-community partnerships:** Local news media organization Hazara Express News, a member of DigiMAP, signed a two-year trilateral agreement in October 2023 with community organization SEEK (Social Empowerment through Education and Knowledge) and the Hazara University in Mansehra in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province to build the professional journalism capacity of students and offer them editorial internships at the Hazara Express News. The agreement is expected to bring additional revenue to the news organization through the non-profit funded trainings conducted for students and also strengthen the human resource capacity of Hazara Express News through student interns. Hazara Express News was supported by IMS and its partner Freedom Network through a media viability training workshop where local partnerships and news revenue diversification were discussed.



## Chapter 2

# Legal and regulatory environment and censorship in Pakistan

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*This chapter examines restrictions (laws, regulations, administrative actions) controlling or constraining the media, including digital spaces, particularly in the context of censorship; key legal cases impacting freedom of expression and media freedoms.*

### **Closing digital spaces, legal squeeze on journalism, dissent and social media access:**

During the period under review, there was a notable escalation in efforts by the previous parliament (whose tenure ended in August 2023) to restrict free speech and intensify digital surveillance. This trend worried journalists, who viewed some of the hastily approved legislations and other approvals of proposed draft laws relating to regulation of digital spaces as indicators of collusion between the elected government and the security establishment to suppress dissent, harass critical journalists, and manipulate the flow of information in their favor.

These steps are worrying as Pakistan is one of the top 10 digitalized societies in terms of internet access and social media use although it also ranks among the top five digital censors – or state requesters of content takedowns from social media platforms such as Facebook, X/Twitter and TikTok. Even after elections in February 2024, actions and statements from the new government – which is the same as the government from the previous parliament – indicates it retains its intent and impetus to narrowing of digital spaces and practices. This seems one of the continuing outcomes of the socio-political polarization and military-political wrangling that has been growing over the last few years in Pakistan.

Following are key developments on this front from the period under review:

- **Draconian bills to dictate digital spaces:** The Pakistani cyberspace came under a distinct regulatory siege as was apparent from the approval by the federal cabinet of the Pakistan Muslim League-N led government in July 2023 of two alarming bills:

- **E-Safety Bill:** This was framed as ‘combating cybercrime and blackmailing’ but mainly aims at cracking down on dissent and establishing an authority to serve as a new headquarter of censorship. It proposes steep fines for both ‘posters of content’ – social media users – and ‘hosters of content’ – tech corporations such as Google and Meta and social media platforms. Requiring registrations of websites and corporations under stringent conditions, it has the potential to cripple Pakistan’s digital economy.
- **Personal Data Protection Bill:** This was framed as ‘providing protection of rights of online consumers’ but basically aims to force tech corporations – both social media and e-commerce and other online service providers – to establish local offices and share data on its consumers/users with the government, as well as forcing on them local laws on censorship. It also seeks to double up as a ‘tax advisor on digital businesses’ and proposes a ‘National Commission for Personal Data Protection’ – to serve as a civil court against both digital natives and global tech platforms. This draft bill actually names some tech corporations including YouTube, Netflix, Amazon, Facebook, X/Twitter and even TikTok.

Cabinet approval of these bills by the 2022-23 government of Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and early statements and indicators from the government of PM Sharif elected in February 2024 indicate real and present dangers for freedom of expression and media as well as digital rights in Pakistan. Attempts are clearly afoot to regulate not only content on social media but also online services and digital commerce, indicating that the government is readying to shift gears from informal coercive regulation to weaponization of regulation by structuralizing it through these bills.

- **Unwired elections:** Citizens were shocked to find cellular and mobile internet services shut down across Pakistan on February 8, 2024, the day 128 million registered voters were eligible to vote in elections for the National Assembly and the four provincial legislatures. The government said the decision was made to pre-empt possible terrorist and other violent acts suggested by intelligence reports. The shutdown remained in place for the entire duration of voting from 8am to 5pm causing immense navigational and communication hardships for voters and therefore contributing to suspicions of manipulation. On March 6, 2024, the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority admitted before the Sindh High Court that it had received instructions by the federal government to suspend access, clarifying, in contradiction with its own rules, that it was merely an implementation agency.

- **Content takedowns:** The Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) told the Sindh High Court in April 2024 that it had “taken significant action against objectionable online content.” Sharing official data on content takedown, PTA told the court it had blocked over 1.25 million URLs where content was “indecent, immoral, and unlawful.” The official data included the following statistics:
  - Total blocked URLs: 1,253,522 URLs. Of these:
  - Indecent and immoral content: 988,659 URLs
  - Content against the glory of Islam: 90,980 URLs
  - Content against security and defense of the country: 84,130 URLs
  - Spreading sectarian and hate speech: 52,787 URLs
  - Defamation and impersonation: 10,363 URLs
  - Proxies: 10,252 URLs
  - Miscellaneous reasons: 9,366 URLs
  - Contempt of court: 6,985 URLs
  - Platform-Specific Blocking:
  - Facebook: 139,415 URLs
  - TikTok: 98,597 URLs
  - YouTube: 50,975 URLs
  - Instagram: 18,123 URLs
  - Snackvideo: 5,184 URLs
  - Bigo and Linkee: 4,285 URLs
  - Dailymotion: 550 URLs
  - Miscellaneous: 887,435 URLs

The PTA said the content takedown “is an ongoing exercise” and it continuously verifies and re-verifies URLs to keep their database on contentious content updated. PTS has been responsive to petitions filed by content creators regarding objectionable material on social media platforms. The PTA actions are guided by Section 37(1) of the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, 2016, which empowers it to remove or block content “in the interests of glory of Islam, national security, public order, decency, morality and contempt of court.”

- **Blockages of internet, social media platforms and mobile services:** Between May 2023 and April 2024, Pakistan experienced several instances of internet shutdowns, affecting tens of millions of people. Key instances included:
  - May 2023: Mobile services and internet access was suspended across Pakistan following the arrest of former Prime Minister Imran

Khan. According to NetBlocks and Open Observatory, this suspension impacted daily-wage earners, businesses, and individuals who rely on mobile data for communication and livelihood. All major social media platforms, including Facebook, X/Twitter, YouTube, WhatsApp, TikTok and Telegram, remained inaccessible for several hours following the suspension.

- o February 2024: A near-universal suspension across the country of mobile phone services on February 8, 2024 – the day over 125 million registered voters had to elect national and provincial legislatures.
- o February 2024: Access to X (formerly Twitter) was suspended, which ran into several weeks until the writing of this report in April 2024.

The announcement of election results in February 2024 resulted in a symphony of protests echoing allegations of manipulation of results. Social media platforms became the primary mode for publication of a torrent of posts and videos purporting evidence of alleged manipulation of results. On February 17, 2024, denizens of X, formerly Twitter, in Pakistan reported being unable to access the social media network. Until April 15, 2024, when this report was written, access to the platform remained suspended.

The evasion of any acknowledgement by the authorities regarding the suspension until March 19, a month since the imposition of the unannounced suspension, suggested a strategy of plausible deniability due to legal challenges on the suspension of access to X landed in courts. Responding to numerous petitions filed by citizens against the internet restrictions, the Sindh High Court, the Peshawar High Court and Islamabad High Court directed the Federal Investigation Agency, the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority, the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting to explain who was responsible for the suspension of X/Twitter and ordered restoration of access to it. All were evasive in their presentations in the courts.

FIA and PTA at first denied responsibility for the suspension, claiming incapacity to reallow access given the suspension was ordered by the interior ministry. When called to elucidate on the matter, a counsel for the interior ministry rationalized the restrictions on the pretext of security threats as underlined by reports submitted by intelligence agencies. The social media platform, one of the most popular in Pakistan, remained suspended until publication of this report.

The Pakistani government's unilateral decision to suspend services of X, drew widespread criticism, including from the US government, Amnesty International, Reporters Without Borders, International Federation of Journalists, Human Rights Commission of Pakistan and a string of Pakistani media development groups, human rights advocates and free speech activists.

- **Criminalizing contempt of parliament:** In May 2023, the parliament approved the Contempt of Parliament Bill, 2023. This legislation empowered lawmakers to charge civilians, including journalists and critics, with contempt. The penalties for those found guilty included six months of imprisonment or a fine of Rs1 million (\$3,500).
- **Making 'errant journalism' cognizable:** In July 2023, the parliament enacted amendments to the PEMRA (Amendment) Act, 2007, which governs broadcast media. These amendments were reintroduced after being previously withdrawn due to criticism from journalists and media organizations. Notable changes to the act include:
  - Expanded definitions: The amendments address misinformation and disinformation more comprehensively.
  - Increased penalties: Outlets that intentionally disseminate false news now face a ten-fold increase in fines, amounting to Rs1 million (\$3,500).
  - Enhanced wage protection (Section 20-A): The bill now provides better safeguards for media workers' salaries.
  - Non-voting membership: The Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists (PFUJ) and the Pakistan Broadcasters Association (PBA) have been included as non-voting members of the PEMRA Authority.
- **Warrantless surveillance:** In August 2023, the Senate approved the Official Secrets (Amendment) Act, 2023. This decision came after a parliamentary uproar compelled the government to retract a contentious provision. The clause in question would have granted intelligence agencies the authority to conduct warrantless searches and seizures, potentially affecting journalists as well.
- **Censoring parliament:** The trend of unexplained media and digital censorship continued, reaching even the parliament. State-owned media channels censored the broadcast of speeches delivered by opposition parliamentarians on the first day of its the sitting on February 29, 2024.

Authorities remained reticent, even after submission of privilege motions by members whose speeches were blocked.

- **‘Ban them all’:** In March 2024, a senator from the Pakistan People’s Party, Behramand Tangi, moved the upper house of parliament calling for a sweeping ban on access to all social media platforms purportedly in the interest of saving young citizenry from adverse effects. The resolution was, however, retracted within days following condemnation from his party, fellow parliamentarians and digital rights advocates.
- **Legal relief – courts to the rescue:** During 2023, the higher judiciary intervened to affirm freedom of expression and access to information. Four judgements, in particular, issued altogether by the Supreme Court of Pakistan and the high courts demonstrated the judicial response.
  - In PLD 2023 Supreme Court 431, the court while directing broadcast regulator PEMRA to remove its ban on a TV drama series noted that “the right to freedom of expression guarantees all other rights” and that restrictions on expression for the purpose of public morality should be considered according to the principles of universal human rights rather than the principles of a single tradition.
  - The Supreme Court ruled on Criminal Petition 225 to quash the police case against journalist and ARY news director Ammad Yousaf. In its ruling, the court also advised authorities to avoid filing malicious and frivolous prosecutions against journalists because it amounts to “depriving citizens from their fundamental rights of freedom of movement, assembly, speech, and right to information”.
  - In PLD 2023 Sindh 182, the Sindh High Court dismissed a petition to ban a feature film from public screening.
  - In Civil Petition 3523, the Supreme Court ruled that while the federal legislation for public access to information did not apply to the judiciary, the principle of Constitutional Article 19-A (Right to Information) does apply to all courts. Therefore, the court ordered its registrar to provide requested public records about the Supreme Court administration to a citizen who had previously been denied his request and filed the petition.

- **Parties commit to free speech:** In the run-up to the national elections in February 2024, several leading political parties, including Pakistan Muslim League-N (PML-N), Pakistan People’s Party and Pakistan Tehreek-e Insaf (PTI), included commitments for journalists’ safety and freedom of speech in their election manifestos. A joint appeal to this effect was made by Freedom Network and Reporters Without Borders. The IMS-supported Pakistan Journalists Safety Coalition (PJSC) and IMS partners Freedom Network and IRADA have consistently conducted advocacy with representatives of these and other political parties over the past two years to enact legislative frameworks that support free and independent media.

Before the elections, all three parties promised forward movement on freedom of expression. Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif promised IMS and Freedom Network at their international conference in Islamabad in December 2022 to establish a national safety mechanism under the federal Protection of Journalists and Media Professionals Act 2021. His PML-N ruling party also pledged to ensure effective implementation of the Right to Information Act and expand insurance provisions for journalists and media workers who lose their lives in the line of duty. The PPP of Former Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto promised to fully operationalize the federal legislation on the protection of journalists and also promised to review “media related laws, including Section 37 of the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act 2016 (PECA 2016), in consultation with stakeholders to protect and enhance freedom of speech”. The PTI committed to ensuring freedom of expression on online media platforms and social networks. All three political parties have won significant representation in the National Assembly. The PJSC and IMS partners will use these manifesto pledges to advance their advocacy with political parties on safety mechanisms and fundamental freedoms in 2024.

## Chapter 3

# Disinformation, hate speech and ethical journalism in Pakistan

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*This chapter examines developments and trends highlighting key instances, cases and responses related to disinformation, misinformation and hate speech, and any initiatives related to countering them including the state of professional and ethical standards in the media industry that can support reliable and evidence-based reporting.*

Thanks to acute political polarization and instability and legacy media remaining under pressure from the state, Pakistan's media and digital landscape struggled to sift fact from fiction in the period under review. Media remained awash in a tide of misinformation and targeted disinformation, in key part fueled by political narratives surrounding campaigns leading up to the national elections in February 2024.

### **University students battling disinformation:**

Constituting 44% (57 million) of the nearly 128 million voters registered with the Election Commission of Pakistan, the country's youthful citizenry comprises a significant demographic a ready audience of electoral influence. Recognizing this, Freedom Network, working with the IMS-supported Coalition Against Disinformation (CAD), an alliance of 10 universities with journalism schools, media development groups and independent digital media platforms, released a report on the Perceptions and Impact of Disinformation on Pakistani Youth in January 2024. With results based on a survey of 1,043 students across 10 universities, the research was aimed at understanding how young Pakistanis navigate the fluid digital environment awash in disinformation. The report's findings, among others, include:

- 63% of the respondents admitted to coming across disinformation on the internet every day.
- 81% of the respondents believed social media platforms contributed the most to the spread of disinformation, with 70% of the view that Facebook was most prone to the spread of disinformation.
- 62% agreed that online disinformation posed a credible threat to Pakistan's



democratic cycle.

- Seven out of every 10 respondents acknowledged fact-checking tools to be an effective tool in combating disinformation encountered on digital platforms.

The report underscores a sizable challenge to an informed citizenry in the digital age including targeted publication of agenda-driven propaganda and the excess of disinformation streams on the internet. It asserted an urgent need to tackle these challenges with a multi-faceted approach including Pakistani universities introducing curated media and digital literacy programs emphasizing on the effectiveness of fact-checking.

### **Academia countering disinformation:**

During its first year of operations, the Coalition Against Disinformation (CAD) developed three learning resources on disinformation, published a joint research study on youth perceptions of disinformation and organized four seminars on countering disinformation at local universities that were attended by around 200 students. The seminars invited journalists and disinformation scholars to also speak about the role of media in fact-checking and the impact of AI on online disinformation. CAD members include journalism professors from 10 Pakistani universities, representatives of civil society organizations, and members of several alliances and associations of journalists.

### **Combating electoral disinformation through technology and coalition:**

In 2024 independent organizations introduced some innovative fact-checking mechanisms for individuals and newsrooms to combat disinformation in the run up to the February 2024 national elections. In January, the Centre for Excellence in Journalism (CEJ) unveiled *iVerify*, a non-partisan fact-checking initiative. In February, Media Matters for Democracy launched *Factor*, a fact-checking mechanism for newsrooms.

CAD member Amber Rahim Shamsi worked with UNDP Pakistan through her organization, the CEJ, to develop *iVerify*, which was launched ahead of the Pakistan elections in February. The innovative tech tool includes claims reporting, verification, and distribution features. Factchecks conducted by *iVerify* were regularly published in Dawn newspaper in the run-up to, during and after elections. Shamsi and CEJ trained and established a team of fact-checkers, including university students, to manage the daily operations of *iVerify*. In connection with the development and launch of the fact-checking tool, training sessions were also conducted by CEJ at several universities, including at mass

communication departments of universities that are members of the IMS supported CAD.

### **Academic courses on digital literacy and disinformation:**

In March 2024, the UNDP office in Pakistan organized an academic consultation with the members of the Coalition Against Disinformation (CAD), including university professors and heads of mass communication departments, in Islamabad. The discussion was focused on the potential needs, challenges, and recommendations for developing and implementing university level courses on digital citizenship, including topics related to digital safety and countering online hate speech and disinformation.

During the consultation, the university academics indicated their willingness to implement proposed courses and expressed their interest in collaborating across departments and across universities on the design and delivery of courses or curriculum on countering disinformation. They also indicated openness to sharing their existing resources and faculty competencies with each other for effective pedagogical responses to disinformation. The CAD members urged that the educational intervention to increase media literacy and address disinformation should not be limited only to mass communication students but should be extended to all university disciplines and all university students.

### **The business cost of shutdowns and disinformation:**

The proliferation of disinformation coupled with the imposition of internet restrictions has complicated the financial well-being of online businesses and consumer protection in Pakistan. In March 2024, digital freedom advocates at Netblocks posited the economic impact of Pakistan's unwarranted blockade of social media platform X, formerly Twitter, at \$50 million. The same month, the Competition Commission of Pakistan recognized a devious pattern of online deceptive marketing. It issued a warning to domestic digital content creators, reminding them of their obligation to comply with ethical marketing directives.

### **The social cost of defamation:**

While Pakistan has had a defamation law for many years, it has not generated a caseload of successful legal challenges. But in March 2024, former information minister for the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government and an active politician affiliated with Pakistan Tehreek-e Insaaf, Shaukat Yousafzai, was found guilty in a rare successful defamation challenge. A district court in Peshawar ordered him to pay Rs150 million as compensation to Awami National Party supremo Asfandiyar Wali Khan for levelling unsubstantiated allegations of corruption against him.

## Chapter 4

# Safety of journalists and other media practitioners

*This chapter examines general statistics on attacks and threats to journalists and other media practitioners and media establishments (newspapers, TV channels, radio stations, press clubs, unions), online harassment/campaigns, etc., and key developments related to safety and combating impunity.*

At least 104 cases of violations – including murder, attacks, injuries, kidnapping, threats and legal cases – were documented by Freedom Network from May 2023 to March 2024 against journalists and other media practitioners across the country, including the federal capital Islamabad, the four provinces of Balochistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Punjab and Sindh, as well as the territories of Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) and Gilgit-Baltistan.

Of these regions, Sindh emerged as the riskiest for journalists and content producers with 33% of the violations (34 out of total 104 cases). Islamabad was the second most dangerous region (26% cases with 27 violations). Khyber Pakhtunkhwa placed third at 23% (24 cases), followed by Punjab with 12% (13 cases), Balochistan 4% (4 cases) and AJK 2% (2 cases) of the violations.

Of these 104 cases, TV medium emerged as the prime journalism target with at least 59 (57%) of the victims working for TV. Print media journalists were second biggest target with 35 practitioners as victims (33%). Nine (9%) of the victims targeted worked for digital media and one victim worked for radio – an Afghan journalist in exile in Islamabad who survived an assassination attempt.

### **Murders:**

During the period spanning from May 2023 to March 2024, the following four journalists were murdered, including three who paid the ultimate price for their public interest journalism, sustaining an extended chilling effect on media freedoms of political expression by inducing self-censorship:

- o On May 5, 2023, Imtiaz Baig, associated with Samaa TV as a reporter, was brutally attacked in Jhelum in Punjab province by unknown attackers with clubs and sticks as he came out of a mosque after prayers. He succumbed to his injuries later in a hospital.
- o On August 8, 2023, Ghulam Asghar Khand, affiliated with Sobh newspaper as a reporter, was at his home in Ahmedpur town of Khairpur city in Sindh province entertaining guests when two unknown men barged in and shot him. He sustained multiple bullet wounds and died on the spot.
- o On August 19, 2023, Jan Muhammad Mahar, working as bureau chief for Kawish TV in Sukkur in Sindh province, was attacked and shot by two unidentified persons riding a motorcycle as the journalist has just sat in his car outside his office.
- o On March 14, 2024, Sagheer Ahmed Laar, working for Khabrain News, was shot by unidentified assailants inside a pharmacy. He died on the spot.

## **Newstribes of the Northwest: Saving journalism in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa’s merged tribal districts:**

Pakistan’s northwest Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province bordering Afghanistan experienced a turbulent and violent 2023 manifested, among other things, by an uptick in terrorist activities. According to the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP), over 160 policemen, more than 70 military personnel, over 60 civilians and more than 170 alleged militants were killed in KP in 2023 in dozens of targeted militant attacks and security operations. The province’s tribal districts – formerly known as Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and since their political merger with KP in 2016 called Merged Districts (MDs) – faced major discontent that has severely affected journalists and journalism in the region. Alleged mismanagement of development resources, resurgence of militancy in the region, delayed repatriation of displaced persons, curbs on fundamental freedoms, incidences of enforced disappearances and the widespread disillusionment and trauma haunt the region, according to the fact-finding report produced by HRCP titled ‘The Merger and its Discontents’.

In late 2023, IMS partner Freedom Network conducted an exhaustive examination of the state of free speech, safety of journalists, survival of press clubs and public interest journalism and the impact of violence and discontent on media practitioners in the merged tribal districts of KP. An ensuing report titled “Newstribes of the Northwest: Saving Journalism in Pakistan’s Tribal Districts,” released in early 2024 said media practitioners in all eight districts

often suffer from trauma related to observation of coverage of human rights violations of residents. Their condition in recent years has also been exacerbated by a gradual erosion of formal media institutions in the region and dwindling interest of Pakistan's mainstream media in dedicating any meaningful or sustainable resources to allow local journalists to highlight the region's regression and drift. Tightening of security and restrictions on civil liberties, amidst increasing securitization and militarization of the region, make journalism and freedom of expression a major hazard in the MDs.

- o Support measures: The report makes several recommendations that can help defend freedom of expression and ensure access to information from the merged tribal districts to save native journalism, including media development groups being the primary source of technical assistance rather than the government to prevent professional compromises; Payment of salaries to journalists on time; Easing of official restrictions on freedom of expression in the MDs; Technical support program for tribal press clubs; Training in conflict sensitive journalism; Legal and medical/trauma aid for journalists and their families in distress; Digital journalism training for freelancers; and Media literacy trainings for government officials and tribal elders.

### **Journalism in peril: growing crimes against journalists undermining media freedoms in Sindh:**

On an average, two journalists were killed every year in Sindh between the period January 2018 and December 2023, according to data available with Freedom Network. All the killed journalists worked for Sindhi-language media. Three journalists were murdered in Khairpur, two each in Sukkur and Naushero Feroze, and one each in Hyderabad and Jacobabad. The list of killed journalists may have been long had 10 other attempts on lives of journalists not failed. Freedom Network in late 2023 produced a detailed report examining the state of media freedoms and safety of journalists and other media professionals in Sindh. Released in 2024, the report examines challenges that freedom of expression is facing in the province and threat actors posing these challenges that are risking lives of journalists in both urban and rural regions of Sindh.

The report, titled "Journalism in peril: growing crimes against journalists undermining media freedoms in Sindh," focuses on the presence of powerful threat actors, coupled with poor service structure, and little effective proactive protection mechanisms at the government level in Sindh that are contributing majorly to a deep-rooted impunity for crimes against journalists in the province. The state of safety of journalists is equally undermined in urban and rural

regions of the province. The establishment of a commission to combat crimes against media industry and its practitioners in 2022 is a good policy step in the direction of combating impunity of crimes but without an office, staff and budget it will fail to do its job, the report notes.

The report notes that the cost of practicing journalism is very high in Sindh due to a coercive and intimidating environment. Not a single perpetrator for any of documented crimes against journalists over the past few years has been made accountable so far, making it an environment of 100 per cent impunity. Rural journalists are mostly untrained in safety and security issues. Even trained journalists are usually not applying safety protocols. A key problem most journalists are guilty of is that they do not share threats with their peers as security experts emphasize that they must be shared with trusted persons in family or office or among colleagues. In absence of any clues, it is hard for investigators to begin investigation from an unknown point.

- o Support measures: The report recommends a series of measures required by multiple stakeholders that are necessary to combat the impunity of crimes against journalists, including: Capacity building of journalists; Safer working conditions; Partnerships between journalists and lawyers; Autonomy of safety commission for journalists; Bridging outreach gap with the districts; Legal literacy for unions and press clubs; Partnerships with media rights groups; and adoption of holistic safety approaches.

## Chapter 5

# Rights of journalists and other media practitioners in Pakistan

*This chapter examines key challenges or developments related to working conditions, labor rights, wages/salaries, and matters related to unionization and press clubs, etc.*

### Health insurance for journalists:

Pakistani journalists often work in hazardous conditions without health or life insurance cover from their employers. In June 2024, the former government of Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif announced an allocation of Rs1 billion (approximately \$3.5 million) for the health insurance of working journalists in the new budget. Pakistan’s fiscal year begins July 1. “Delighted to announce that an allocation has been made in the budget for the health insurance of working journalists,” then federal information minister Marriyum Aurangzeb posted on Twitter. “For the first time ever, Rs 1 billion has been allocated [for this purpose] in the budget for [fiscal year] 2023-24.” The Shehbaz government since then is back in power after the February 2024 elections. Aurangzeb is currently senior minister in the Punjab provincial government. All journalists currently members of journalists’ unions are eligible to apply for the health insurance cover. Around 20,000 journalists are expected to benefit.

### Assisting Afghan journalists in exile in Pakistan:

In November 2023, Freedom Network with the support of Reporters Without Borders launched an assistance program for Afghan journalists exiled to Pakistan after the Taliban re-takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021. Under the program, Freedom Network established the “Pakistan-Afghanistan Journalists Solidarity Network” (PAJSN) bringing together senior members from Afghan and Pakistani media communities, including the Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists (PFUJ), Khyber Union of Journalists (KhUJ), Rawalpindi-Islamabad Union of Journalists (RIUJ), National Press Club and Peshawar Press Club, to help strategize and steer the support program. Under the program, Freedom Network provided financial, medical, legal and humanitarian assistance to over 50 exiled Afghan journalists and their families. The Network employed advocacy to engage government

authorities, UN organizations and diplomatic missions in Pakistan and local human, media and women rights groups to hold dialogues and orientations with exiled journalists and seek assistance for them. This network also plans to take up issues Afghan journalists face in Pakistan and help them reintegrate into journalism institutions in Pakistan. The Network has so far conducted a desk review of existing literature, reports, and studies on Afghan media in Pakistan and Key informant interviews with Afghan media start-ups, media organizations, government officials, and other stakeholders to gather insights on the information needs, gaps, and challenges faced by Afghan media start-ups in Pakistan. Focus group discussions with Afghan media start-ups have also been conducted to obtain in-depth insights into their information needs, challenges, and expectations besides an exhaustive survey to gather quantitative data on the information needs and challenges faced by Afghan journalists in exile in Pakistan.

### **Unionization of digital journalists:**

In August 2023, the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) supported the Digital Media Alliance of Pakistan (DigiMAP) in mobilizing support for the unionization of digital journalists. This entailed development of a working paper on a strategy for the establishment of a labor union for digital journalists. This working paper was used to conduct a series of consultations – supported by awareness campaigns, networking, online engagement, and advocacy – with over 50 digital journalists based in Islamabad, Karachi, Lahore and Quetta. They endorsed the strategy for such a union for the growing ranks of digital journalists who often face challenges of acceptability as equals in other representative platforms. The campaign culminated in an application for registration of a trade union for them with the National Industrial Relations Commission.

### **Training unionists in leadership:**

In October 2023, the IFJ in partnership with the PFUJ launched a series of union leadership trainings in Islamabad, Punjab, Sindh and Balochistan for mid-career members of journalists' unions. The trainings addressed needs for relevant skills required in meeting key concerns related to issues faced by unions and on strengthening unions and their work. Key issues identified and addressed in the training about union challenges in Pakistan included: Lack of CBAs [collective bargaining agents] in media; Wage issues concern including delayed salaries, low wages or no wages; Low awareness of labor rights and laws; Exclusion of journalists working for digital media from unions and press clubs; Sub-par communications strategies and capacities in unions.



**Poor working conditions:**

Pakistan’s media work landscape remains riddled with uncertainty, with journalists facing layoffs and prospects of future employment elusive. A ‘Decent Work Survey’ conducted by IFJ in 2023 in Sindh revealed the extent of adverse working conditions for media workers. Barely 40% of those surveyed said they were currently employed while less than 30% of those with jobs had fixed term contracts. Just under 60% said their contract is not renewed annually while barely 30% find opportunities for career advancement. Most complained of salary arrears, being overworked and under-compensated with few or no standard benefits.

# Status of women in Pakistani media

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*This chapter examines challenges including work related threats and attacks (online and offline) against women journalists, gender related discrimination (working conditions, sexual harassment, wage inequality, representation challenges in newsrooms, unions and press clubs, etc.)*

Despite some strides made in recent years, the media industry in Pakistan continues to be a generally unfriendly space for women – both in terms of inclusion as journalism practitioners as well as how they are portrayed in journalism content. Women still constitute a miniscule quantum of practicing journalists, other media professionals and content producers. This is as true of mainstream and formal media as it is of independent digital news media, an ecosystem that has grown in recent years. Media content too suffers from gross under-representation of views and perspectives of genders other than men. Women who may not be journalists but are constituents of the digital landscape, including free speech practitioners and participants in social media spaces, often face harassment and trolling that also spills over to spaces used by women journalists. Gender-based discrimination, journalism work-related intimidation and under-representation in newsrooms, unions and press clubs remains rife.

### **Harassed and trolled for being visible and vocal online:**

The past year witnessed continued intimidation of women in online and journalism spaces with social media platforms becoming a minefield where incidents of gendered abuse, harassment and intimidation were frequent and unmitigated. Released in April 2024 by the Digital Rights Foundation, the annual Cyber Harassment Helpline Report unveiled a disconcerting uptick in technology-facilitated gender-based violence. The year-around facilitative helpline recorded 2,473 new cases of online harassment in 2023, with 1,434 (59%) cases filed by women and transgender complainants. Punjab emerged as the epicenter of the digital disquietude with 70% of the reports (1,724 out of total 2,473 cases), followed by Sindh with 11% (261) and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa with 5% (112).

The weaponization of online misogyny using generative artificial intelligence tools peaked before the general elections in February 2024, according to the report. The digitally active section of the country's 128 million eligible voters was constantly exposed to virtual campaigns, political and otherwise, aimed at targeting the reputation of women journalists, actions meant to stifle their constitutional rights to free expression and association. The report's narrative was further strengthened by accounts of online abuse, defamation and governmental heavy-handedness faced by at least six women journalists working for both linear and digital media outlets during 2023, with these accounts substantiated by reports published in news dailies and court proceedings.

### **Unequal newsrooms for women:**

Pakistan's media landscape grapples with a significant gender gap crisis. The scarcity of full-time female employees and the absence of dedicated gender-sensitive policies within newsrooms highlight a pressing gender emergency for the already fragile media industry. These realities were highlighted in a special report, "Unequal Newsrooms: A Gender Audit of Pakistani Media Organizations", produced by Freedom Network in early 2024. Conducted in conjunction with the Women Journalists' Association (WJA) and with assistance of International Media Support (IMS), the report showcased a gender audit of 15 media organizations with operations in Islamabad. The findings painted a grim picture of gender equality and opportunity on newsrooms, practically a boys' club.

The report revealed that women constituted a mere 11% of the total journalism staffers employed by audited outlets with none assigned a senior management role in most. With federal law now mandating the commissioning of anti-harassment committees, only two out of the 15 organizations had one, while most did not offer lawful paid maternity or paternity leave to full-time employees. Seven of the 15 media outlets were reported to delay payment of monthly remuneration and at least three were offering lower wages to women staffers when compared to their male counterparts at the same position. At least 11 organizations were found to be gender blind on the IMS gender sensitivity index, meaning they failed to inculcate policies that could acknowledge gendered challenges.

The report recommended a complete overhaul of the media industry's dismissive attitude towards gender-specific issues as being imperative to improve gender-sensitivity and inclusivity. It said media outlets should conduct internal gender audits while ensuring diversification of their hiring practices

and media development stakeholders must urge legal compliance for news organizations, ensuring education and awareness for fair financial benefits for a diverse workforce. It also called for media industry to necessitate transparency and parity in employment contracts, while allowing legal remedies for violations.

### **Intimidated for their journalism:**

Some women journalists reported cases of harassment, intimidation and trolling in the period under review. These included Laiba Zainab, a freelance journalist who reported online harassment in October 2023 with trolls demanding she censor herself or face the consequences. In December 2023, digital journalists Fatima Razzak and Somaiyah Hafeez were illegally detained for a while for their coverage of a protest camp in Islamabad led by Baloch activist Mahrang Baloch. In February 2024 TV anchorperson Meher Bokhari faced digital abuse with some supporters of the ruling Pakistan Muslim League-N criticizing her perceived bias in favor of the opposition Pakistan Tehreek-e Insaf party. In one instance the news was good: In December 2023, international award-winning TV journalist Asma Shirazi got some relief from the Islamabad High Court, which ordered a news channel to air an apology for defaming her and pay her a fine of Rs50,000 as compensation.

### **Campaigns for more women in media:**

In the period under review, two advocacy campaigns were launched aimed at rallying support for greater gender inclusivity and improved representation of women in newsrooms, digital media and in journalists' unions and press clubs.

- o 'Include women in media!': The first campaign was launched by Women Journalists Association (WJA) in November 2023. Titled "*Media mein auraton ko shamil karo!*" ["Include women in media!"], WJA, supported by Freedom Network and IMS, launched a series of digital advocacy messages calling for urgent actions by stakeholders to address the lack of gender diversity in Pakistani journalism and news content. The campaign was aimed at the media organizations and media managers, as well as media development organizations, gender support groups and civil society. WJA sought actions from the media industry, including digital media, to be gender plural and gender sensitive in its practices, production, and priorities.

WJA asserted that public interest is best served by media that is representative of gender pluralism, perspectives, voices, and interests, and

yet the media ignores and under-represents women and gender minorities, leading to lack of gender-sensitive content. Some of the slogans adopted by the campaign included: “*Jis mein aurat ki raii nahi, woh khabar mukamal nahi* [‘News that does not include views of women is incomplete’]”, “*Aurat newsroom mein nahi, tabhi khabar mein nahi* [Women are not in the news because women are not in newsrooms]” and “*Hamara agenda, media mein aurat ki awaz* [Our agenda: women’s voices in the media]”. The campaign used the following hashtags: #WJA #HamariWJA #Media4Women.

WJA is an association of working women journalists and freelancers, based in Islamabad with representation from across the country, that seeks to protect the rights of women journalists and advocate for an enabling media environment that facilitates women to work in journalism without any discrimination.

- o ‘Pakistan’s media needs women!’: The second campaign was launched in December 2023 by Women’s Media Forum Pakistan (WMFP), with support of the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) and the Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists (PFUJ). The campaign aimed at mobilizing improved representation of women in media seeking enforcement of labor laws, gender sensitization of newsrooms and more women in media leadership positions. The campaign included holding dialogues between women journalists and managers of newsrooms; public discussions through webinars and Twitter Space sessions; and discussion on WhatsApp groups of women journalists’ communities.

The campaign was partly inspired by findings of a mapping of journalists’ unions, press clubs and some media groups, titled “Mapping Women and Gender in Pakistan’s Media”. Findings showed low numbers of women practitioners in formal media; little or no representation of women in media leadership positions; including a massively disproportionate share in memberships of press clubs.

## Chapter 7

# Evolving media in Pakistan, including Big Tech

*This chapter examines the impact of disruption of technologies, including digitalization and AI, on the media landscape; the evolving indie digital news media ecosystem and community or hyperlocal journalism, as well as diversity and pluralism in media.*

### **Use of AI by politicians in elections media strategy:**

Pakistan held elections for national and provincial legislatures in February 2024. In terms of media communications on political narratives and its innovative use for electoral campaigning purposes, it was the first time AI was employed by a political party. Former prime minister Imran Khan, who was prevented from standing in elections after being declared ineligible on the basis of controversial corruption trial, first used an audio clone on December 18, 2023, to rally support for his party Pakistan Tehreek-e Insaaf (PTI). He was in prison at the time.

PTI released a four-minute video that evening that used AI-voice cloning technology to replicate Khan's voice. In the video, which aired during a "virtual rally" in Pakistan, the dubbed audio was accompanied by a caption that stated, "AI voice of Imran Khan based on his notes." News reports said that Khan sent PTI a shorthand script, which was later edited by a legal team to better resemble the politician's rhetorical style. The resulting text was then dubbed into audio using software from the AI company ElevenLabs, which makes a text-to-speech tool and an AI voice generator. The five-hour virtual rally drew more than 500,000 views on YouTube and was also streamed by thousands on other social media platforms. In order to prevent the public from viewing the virtual rally, the government shut down access to Facebook, Instagram, X, and YouTube for a few hours. According to a statement by internet tracking agency NetBlocks, there was a nationwide disruption to those social platforms across Pakistan.

In January 2024, the PTI accused the caretaker government of enforcing an internet outage to sabotage its online election campaign. With the police banning the PTI from holding rallies and imposition of internet shutdowns, Khan's supporters resorted to social media, prominently TikTok. A day after

election on February 8, 2024, a video of Imran Khan – who was still in jail – declaring victory went viral on social media. This was a 30 second AI-generated video of Khan congratulating his supporters for making PTI ready to take power. His party failed to assume power, but this was the first AI-generated ‘victory speech’ by anyone in South Asia.

Earlier, on January 9, 2024, Khan was asked during a court appearance how an article that had appeared a few days earlier in The Economist magazine under his name was submitted considering that he is jailed. He was quoted by Dawn newspaper as confirming that the views were his, but he did not write the piece himself. Rather it was based on points he had dictated to his party members visiting him in jail, which were put into words through the use of AI. Other media reports suggested ChatGPT was used to formulate his points into an essay.

### **Visibility of public interest journalism mandate of indie digital media:**

Over the past few years an ecosystem of independent digital community news media platforms has started flourishing with sizable individual audiences. However, since most of these are hyperlocal in their operations, the popular public imagination still mostly fails to register their overall identity as a distinct provider of community news and public interest journalism that has gone mostly missing in legacy media.

To address this issue, the Digital Media Alliance of Pakistan (DigiMAP), a collective of about 50 non-legacy indie digital news media platforms operating across Pakistan, in November 2023 launched an online campaign to improve its visibility and introduce the alliance to key stakeholders. The campaign “*Awami Sahafat Mumkin Hai, Humaray Saath* [Public interest journalism is possible with us]” sought to raise awareness about the public interest mission of DigiMAP and its member news organizations.

The digital campaign, which was shared from the alliance’s social media accounts and website, featured posters and short videos with details of the alliance’s achievements, its current operations, and the profiles and success stories of DigiMAP members. The campaign adopted the hashtags #DigiMAP, #AwamiSahaft, and #CommunityMedia.

DigiMAP works to promote solidarity among Pakistani digital media to strengthen public interest journalism. Its approaches include connecting alliance members to resources, providing networking opportunities, and boosting media

empowerment through collaborative advocacy. DigiMAP member organizations, which are spread across the country from Gilgit to Karachi, embrace Pakistan's cultural diversity and highlight the issues of marginalized communities by reporting on public interest issues, especially from periphery regions and rural areas.

The elected DigiMAP cabinet believes that reliable and independent local journalism is the key to solving the development challenges of the country. Without listening to the voices of the local communities, it is difficult to develop policies that can bring meaningful socioeconomic change. Local journalism provides the two-way information connection between community needs and policies that can ensure the rights and dignity of the population while working sustainably towards improvement in living standards.

The mission and vision of the alliance not only perfectly aligns with the work of various civil society organizations that support human rights, such as freedom of expression and right to information, and promote human development, but also provides an avenue to facilitate a constructive dialogue between citizens and State. In addition, DigiMAP's concern for the rights and interests of digital media and digital journalists bring it in league with the trade unions and journalist associations that consistently demand rights, fair wages and safety guarantees for media professionals.

To strengthen these linkages and convert them into partnerships and collaborations, the online campaign messages addressed local and international civil society organizations, media development groups, relevant government departments, peer digital journalism outlets, and other representative associations of news media and journalists.

### **Diversity and pluralism in local media – boost for marginalized communities nationally and internationally:**

International media outlet BBC's Urdu service picked up an August 2023 exclusive community news report that celebrated the life and career of young lower-caste Hindu woman athlete Tulsī Meghwar, bringing national attention to the achievements of individuals who are forced to overcome prejudice and additional barriers to professional success due to their religious identity. Lower-caste Hindus are a religious minority group in Pakistan and have also traditionally been the target of structural discrimination and persecution within the Hindu religion's strict caste system. The news story was carried by DigiMAP member platform Prism by their reporter Ashok Ramani.



Earlier baseline and intermediate research done by IRADA show that legacy media in Pakistan generally ignores the coverage of issues related to faith-based minorities and usually portrays them as helpless victims. The fact that the content on hyperlocal Prism media was picked up by mainstream legacy media indicates that support of local indie digital media can influence other well-resourced media to improve the religious diversity and inclusivity of their news content. Ramani had received training on sensitive news coverage of religious minorities through an IMS supported training workshop delivered by its partner IRADA. Ramani's story, originally published in Urdu by Prism, was picked up later by the BBC Urdu website, which developed a multimedia story on it.

## Chapter 8

# Pakistan's international obligations on freedom of expression and media

*This chapter examines the state of Pakistan's compliance with international obligations on freedom of expression and media freedoms, including UN Plan of Action, SDG16.10; key concerns raised and reports issued by international actors (UN system, interstate bodies, governments, INGOs, etc.) about state of freedom of expression and media.*

### **Unmet obligations under UN Plan of Action on Safety of Journalists:**

Inspired by its own endorsement in 2013 of the UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity, Pakistan emerged as a global leader in journalist safety in 2021 with the passage of the provincial Sindh Protection of Journalists and Other Media Practitioners Act and the federal Protection of Journalists and Media Professionals Act. These measures mandated government action to address impunity for crimes committed against professionals practicing free speech in the journalistic realm and were appreciated by the international community, notably by the European External Action Services' annual GSP Report released in 2023. However, a persistent lack of interest in their implementation by the federal and provincial governments leading up to May 2024 raises concerns regarding their effectiveness in dealing with such violations of constitutional rights.

Despite the clear mandate of Section 12 in the Protection of Journalists and Media Professionals Act, four successive federal governments since 2021 failed to establish an independent commission to investigate and address complaints filed by journalists and media workers. This remains a critical gap in federal mechanisms to protect them. While the federal government advertised a call for applications for the position of the chairperson of the safety commission under its law first in August 2023 and then in April 2024, the prolonged state of near-total impunity of crimes against journalists continued, thereby affecting media freedoms. The safety commission established under the Sindh Protection of

Journalists and Other Media Practitioners Act, 2021, while notified in late 2022, remained without an office, budget or staff well into 2024, hampering its ability to protect journalists and thereby perpetuate impunity.

Former Sindh High Court judge Rasheed A Rizvi, who was appointed chairperson of the Sindh safety commission, passed away in early 2024. His brief tenure was characterized by the provincial government's indifference to providing him the resources necessary to do his job, He was succeeded by another retired Sindh High Court judge, Nazar Akbar. The Sindh safety commission continues to work without office space, staff or budget until the writing of this report, with only Rs50 million allocated as a one-time special grant-in-aid in September 2023 after the Pakistan Journalists Safety Coalition pursued the Sindh government for short-term financial support.

Released in November 2023 by Freedom Network, the Impunity of Crimes against Journalists Pakistan Report said despite a lack of resources, the Safety Commission under the late Rizvi exhibited resilience as it navigated through obstacles to address 10 formal complaints in 2023, facilitating return of two missing journalists from Karachi, securing release of another from unlawful detention, and intervening to ensure safety of two others. This story is a tale of two realities: the promise of ensuring a safe environment for journalists and the persistent denial of resources to achieve that objective. The latter compromises the state's ability to keep its international promises, undermining compliance with target 16.10 outlined under the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals agenda.

### **Unmet targets under EU GSP Plus commitments:**

As part of its diplomatic relations with the European Union, Pakistan has been accorded the EU General Scheme of Preferences (GSP) Plus status that allows duty free or limited duty exports to EU. The preferential status is in exchange for Pakistan to pursue its sustainable development goals (SDGs), including SDG Goal 16 ('Peace, justice and strong institutions') in general and its sub goal 16.10 ('Ensure public access to information in accordance with national legislation and international agreements) in particular. Pakistan remained lacking on its performance in meeting Goal 16.10, as indicated in the Fourth GSP Report issued by the European External Action Service in November 2023. It analyses performance on implementation of 27 international conventions in recipient states, including Pakistan, related to freedom of expression.

Although the report appreciated Pakistan's legislative progress (the two laws on safety of journalists), the EU questioned the continued pervasiveness of

impunity of crimes against restrictions on freedom of expression and enforced disappearances of civilians, including journalists. The report termed these shortcomings violative of international commitments made by Islamabad and contrary to Pakistan's concessions under the GSP Plus status.

## Chapter 9

# Actions to improve an enabling environment for freedom of expression and media

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*This concluding chapter offers both general and specific suggestions and action points for relevant stakeholders related to issues covered in this report in the preceding chapters.*

### Recommendations relating to defending freedom of expression

- Expand ownership of general consensus on protecting freedom of expression and right to information, including online digital spaces >>> establish a national alliance on freedom of expression.
- Establish a formalized working relationship between local and international stakeholders to coordinate advocacy priorities and strategies on freedom of expression and right to information, including online digital spaces >>> to improve visibility and frequency of joint positions.
- Enlist support of political parties at both federal and provincial levels to encourage open and broad-based consultations on any proposed legislation – including the controversial E-Safety Bill and Personal Data Protection Bill >>> to prevent any intended erosion of constitutional rights, including the right to free speech.

### Recommendations relating to countering disinformation

*Source: “Perceptions and Impact of Disinformation on Pakistani Youth: How University Students Understand Disinformation” study jointly produced by the Coalition Against Disinformation and Freedom Network.*

- **Media literacy programs:** Introduce comprehensive media literacy programs in universities, preferably through journalism and mass

communications departments. These programs should aim to educate students on identifying and mitigating the impact of disinformation, covering critical thinking skills, source evaluation, and fact-checking techniques.

- **Incorporate fact-checking in curriculum:** Integrate fact-checking mechanisms and media literacy modules into the academic curriculum, ensuring that students are equipped with the necessary skills to critically assess information as precursor to their journalism careers.
- **Promote critical thinking skills:** Organize workshops and seminars with a focus on enhancing critical thinking skills among students. Foster an environment that encourages questioning information, verifying sources, and analyzing content before accepting it as factual.

### **Policy recommendations for government entities or agencies responsible for formulating policies or laws:**

- **Government collaboration with social media platforms:** Establish collaborations with social media platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and WhatsApp or their local representatives to formulate and execute strategies aimed at curtailing the dissemination of disinformation. Policies should address the responsibility of these platforms in monitoring and restricting false information.
- **National media literacy campaign:** Initiate a national media literacy campaign in support with government bodies, NGOs, media development groups and educational institutions. This campaign should target a wide audience, emphasizing the importance of media literacy in navigating the digital information landscape.
- **Fact-checking initiatives:** Allocate resources for the establishment and promotion of fact-checking initiatives at the national level. Support organizations dedicated to fact-checking and disinformation prevention, fostering a culture of verification and accountability. Support interfacing between local fact check organizations and journalism departments.
- **Institutionalized reporting mechanisms:** Establish institutionalized reporting mechanisms for disinformation. Foster a collaborative approach by encouraging students and the public to report instances of false

information, thereby creating an effective strategy to address and counter disinformation.

## Recommendations relating to strengthening journalists' solidarity

*Source: "South Asia Press Freedom Report 2023-24" annual analysis report produced by the International Federation of Journalists*

Considering the serious problems of safety of journalists, rights of media workers and viability of media industry, especially an expanding digital media without sustainability strategies, stakeholders invested in professional journalism and an enabling environment for freedom of expression, some collaborative efforts are inevitable. Among others, these include:

- Continued advocacy for and technical capacity building of public and private mechanisms that aid prevention, protection and prosecution support for journalists and other media workers targeted, or in distress.
- Augmenting support and resources for expanding greater equality and gender equity within media industry, including media houses, unions and press clubs.
- Strengthening solidarity and professionalism capacities of representative associations of working journalists such as unions and press clubs.
- Expanding representation, advocacy and protection capacities of the growing ecosystem of digital and freelance journalists who continue to remain under-represented and generally unheard within existing structures.
- Building legal literacy and legal strategization capacities of journalists and other media practitioners to defend themselves against state targeting and apathy.

## Recommendations relating to improving gender equity and gender-friendly newsrooms:

*Source: "Unequal Newsrooms: A Gender Audit of Pakistani Media Organizations" research report produced jointly by Women Journalists Association and Freedom Network.*

- **Gender audits:** Gender support groups and media development organizations should conduct periodic – annual or biennial (once every two years) – gender audits of media organizations (print, electronic and digital

media) to measure and track gender affirmative levels in compliance with legal, social and professional gender equity targets, goals and indicators.

- **Gender strategies:** News organizations and news managers should develop organizational gender strategies, enforce equitable recruitment and promotions policies, comply with gender-related laws and regulations, and develop actions plans in consultation with female employees to make the workplace gender sensitive.
- **Gender sensitization:** Civil society groups and media development organizations should raise awareness among media houses about the moral and business cases for gender diversity, share a model gender equality policy with news media organizations, and offer gender sensitivity training sessions for journalists.
- **Gender friendly practices:** Journalists and their representative trade unions and associations should demand transparency in contracts and wage structures as well as fair mechanisms for professional career development. They should seek legal help where news organizations violate gender-related laws and regulations and make their own forums gender inclusive by listening to and addressing the concerns raised by women journalists.
- **Gender equality:** Policymakers should get media regulators to implement gender equality measures at news organizations, launch equal employment opportunity awareness programs, and strengthen mechanisms to curb the workplace harassment and safety threats faced by women journalists.

## Recommendations relating to combating impunity of crimes against journalists in Sindh

*Source: “Journalism in Peril: Crimes against Journalists Undermining Media Freedoms in Sindh” research report produced by Freedom Network.*

- **Capacity building of journalists:** Professional and safety-related trainings need to be held for journalists and other media professionals in Sindh, especially in the interior of the province, to better equip them with tools to work professionally and safely.



- **Safer working conditions:** The Labor Department of Sindh government needs to mobilize resources to ensure labor laws are effectively implemented across media houses, especially clauses related to workplace safety and hazards, to combat the threats and violence that the province's journalists and other media professionals face in line of their work.
- **Partnerships between journalists and lawyers:** The Sindh Bar Councils' regional bars and regional unions of journalists need to formulate formal working partnerships to jointly combat impunity through legal actions, including prosecuting crimes against journalists and other media professionals.
- **Autonomy of safety commission:** The Sindh provincial government must immediately provide an office, appropriate equipment, staff and adequate budgetary resources to effectively operationalize the Sindh Commission for Protection of Journalists and Other Media Professionals (CPJMP).
- **Bridging outreach gap with the districts:** Regional coordination offices of the CPJMP must be set up at the division level in Sindh to provide prevention, protection and prosecution resources for safety of journalists and other media professionals across Sindh.
- **Legal literacy for unions and press clubs:** Media law clinics and orientation workshops should be held in all press clubs and journalists' unions offices across Sindh province to provide literacy about the Sindh legislation on safety of journalists as well as other national media and journalists' related laws.
- **Partnerships with media freedom groups:** The CPJMP, in partnership with civil society organizations, such as Freedom Network, must move forward to enforce full compliance of the Sindh legislation on safety of journalists and conduct annual compliance audits of the law.
- **Adopting holistic safety approaches:** The CPJMP must adopt best practices and a professional approach, in partnerships with relevant media development groups where appropriate, to create an effective response and relief system that incorporates the '3P' approach to combat impunity of crimes against journalists and other media professionals – prevention, protection and prosecution.

## Recommendations relating to saving public interest journalism in tribal districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

*Source: “Newstribes of the Northwest: Saving Journalism in Pakistan’s Tribal Districts” research report produced by Freedom Network*

- **Self-help:** Support to strengthen local media in MDs (Merged Districts) must come from media development organizations and bodies rather than from official sources that comes with strings attached.
- **Salaries:** Media organizations must pay regular salaries while implementing the wage-board award. Non-payment makes them vulnerable to professional compromises.
- **Freedom of expression:** The district administrations and the security forces need to reverse sweeping restrictions on freedom of expression, safety and mobility of journalists.
- **Information access:** The Right to Information Act of KP has been extended to the MDs but is not being enforced. Its enforcement can give new life to journalism in the region.
- **Support press clubs:** Press clubs in the MDs have few facilities or funds. In the absence of media houses in the regions, technically resourcing press clubs could equip journalists in the region to sustain their professionalism.
- **Dealing with stress:** Stress/trauma counseling for journalists at local press clubs should be arranged by making available mental health practitioners to work with local reporters. First aid training at the press club level and for journalists in the areas that do not have one are also needed.
- **Conflict-sensitive journalism:** Training for journalists of the region in conflict-sensitive reporting is essential to empower them and optimize their safety through ethical reporting.
- **Support:** Financial, medical and legal support for families of journalists threatened, injured and killed in violent incidents is necessary, considering the region’s record of use of violence against them to promote self-censorship.

- **Digital savvy:** Digital media training for journalists, including women, who have access to the internet and use digital technology for reporting. Many have their own social media news platforms but not all are skilled in digital media ethically and responsibly, leading to risks and threats.
- **Community media:** Local community media is badly needed because mainstream media is only interested in breaking news like terrorism, not covering the needs and voices of locals.
- **Media literacy:** Journalists face threats from communities that are not media literate. Media literacy sessions should be held for the community in town halls, beginning with tribal elders and then taken to schools and colleges to educate youth.





# ABOUT FREEDOM NETWORK ([www.fnpk.org](http://www.fnpk.org))

Freedom Network is a Pakistan-based independent media and development sector research, advocacy and training organization registered with the Securities and Exchange Commission of Pakistan (SECP). It was established in 2013. In 2017, Freedom Network was awarded the prestigious global French Human Rights Prize 2017 by the Government of France for “its efforts for safety and protection of journalists and promotion of freedom of expression.”

**OUR MISSION:** To protect civil liberties, including freedom of expression and access to information, and promote an informed society that sees media as a key partner in a democratic and pluralist Pakistan.

## **OUR OBJECTIVES AND EXPERTISE:**

- 1. To serve as a watchdog on the right to freedom of expression, including freedom of the press and Internet and of civil society**
  - a. Through 24/7 monitoring of the rights to freedom of expression, including freedom of the press and online
  - b. Through monitoring and documenting violations of freedom of expression, including Freedom of the press and Internet
  - c. Through researching the causes, symptoms and case studies of the violations of freedom of expression in all forms of media
  - d. Through monitoring violation of the right to expression of non-media sections of society such as human rights groups, development practitioners, and the performing arts industry
  
- 2. To promote an ethical and professional media**
  - a. By promoting, supporting and conducting advocacy, research, analysis and training initiatives for media
  - b. By promoting, supporting and conducting initiatives to help civil society strengthen its stake in a pluralistic, independent, open and professional media with emphasis on professional ethics and journalism best practices
  - c. By strengthening the interface between media and civil society by improving professional development communications within and for development sector organizations as well as for their supporters and donors.
  - d. By promoting a culture of safety and security for journalists and media houses through advocacy, research and training on issues of safety and impunity against journalists.
  
- 3. To serve as an advocate for freedom of expression and access to information as fundamental rights**
  - a. Through a broad range of advocacy, research and analysis initiatives
  - b. By promoting and building synergies between and among media and civil society stakeholders
  - c. By promoting citizens’ participation on issues relating to freedom of expression and access to information
  - d. By conducting assessment missions, studies, research, translations of resources in multiple languages on its own and for other organizations for wider national and international audiences