

## THE PREVENTION OF ELECTRONIC CRIMES ACT (PECA) AND DIGITAL NEWS REPORTING IN PAKISTAN

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### ABSTRACT

Initially passed in 2016 as among the most effective tools of media control, the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) 2016 has proven to be one of the most influential tools of media control in Pakistan. The article reports on a primary field survey of 200 journalists within three different districts Sargodha, Khushab and Islamabad between January and April 2026. Using a structured questionnaire methodology with the added value of in-depth qualitative interviews, the study examines how the provisions of PECA have transformed the daily news-gathering procedures and editorial decision-making processes, as well as the psychological well-being of working news journalists in urban federal and rural Punjab settings. The findings show the alarming rates of self-censorship (78%), the fear of being prosecuted by the law (81%), the lack of coverage of sensitive issues (74%), and the fact that almost everyone fears reporting on social media. These results are placed within the context of broader national press freedom crisis that have been reported by Freedom Network, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) and the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ). The article suggests that PECA no longer represents a cybersecurity law but is now a method to suppress democratic processes by working journalists in Pakistan, and it is time to urgently reform the law and provide an independent judiciary and enhanced protection of working journalists in Pakistan.

### 1. Introduction: A Law Which is of Caution, and Which is of Coercion.

In Pakistan journalism has been a dangerous profession. Throughout the decades, journalists have been able to overcome various political pressures, military sensitivities, religious indignation, and economic instability. However, with the advent of digital media there came something new a space in which the voices of hitherto marginalized groups of individuals - rural correspondents, citizen reporters, digital commentators, etc. - could directly address the

national and international audience without necessarily getting the nod of a television studio or a newspaper proprietor.

It was namely this democratizing possibility that made PECA 2016 so fear-inducing to media practitioners ever since its enactment. In the form of a cybersecurity law, a safeguard against hacking, cyberstalking and Internet harassment, the Act included within its provisions clauses that were so broadly drafted that critics immediately realized their openness to abuse. There is no carve-out of public interest journalism in section 20 which

criminalizes the transmission of information that is offensive, obscene or is likely to lead to harm to the reputation of a person. The provisions of section 26 and 37 provide broad sweeping powers to block and delete online content. The amendments of 2025 added nine more categories of the banned content such as the fabricated news which is so unspecified that any critical reporting can be prosecuted as such. The impacts have been tangible and disastrous. As of October 2025, at least 30 journalists had been the subject of 36 legal actions at PECA alone, with official statistics cited in the April 2026 annual report published by Freedom Network, having 187 cases prosecuted as a result of the fake news provision of the amended law. In December 2024, one wave of PECA charges, which accused 150 journalists at once of alleged 'glorification of terrorism' - charges linked, in most instances, to the coverage which was critical of state institutions. It is not addressed in this article in dealing with these national figures in the abstract. It brings the story down to the level of the individual journalist: the district reporter in Khushab who deleted a story about a local official after receiving a telephone call at midnight: the digital correspondent in Sargodha who has stopped covering land disputes because she cannot afford a lawyer; the Islamabad-based investigative journalist who uses three different encrypted phones and still wonders whether that is enough. The empirical core of this paper is their experiences which they gathered in a rigorous primary survey of 200 journalists in three districts.

## 2. History and Legislative History.

### 2.1 Digital Turn in Pakistani Journalism.

The media in Pakistan experienced a seismic change between 2005 and 2015. The opening up of the broadcasting industry under General Pervez Musharraf had created dozens of privately owned television channels, and had broken the monopoly of electronic news that had been held by state-owned television stations. The next smartphone revolution saw the mobile internet reach tens of millions of citizens making WhatsApp, Twitter (now X), Facebook, and YouTube the leading platforms through which many Pakistanis - and an increasing number of journalists - create and consume news.

To journalists who work in smaller urban areas and rural districts - the exact group that this study was aimed at - digital platforms were a lifeline. A Khushab correspondent might be able to file a story to an editor in Lahore, in seconds, present video evidence of a local flooding to thousands of followers, or publish themselves on YouTube, without ever having to be institutionally affiliated. The provincial voices that had long been kept marginalized by barriers of entry that had long been there vanished.

The change in media production did not go hand in hand with a similar change in the legal protections. The laws on defamation in Pakistan were still criminalized, based on the colonial era laws. Although the right to information framework, as it is now, through the 2017 federal level Right of Access to Information Act, was enhanced, it was still not strongly enforced. And into this realm, PECA was passed in National Assembly in 2016.

### 2.2 PECA 2016: Core Provisions and Their Implications for Journalism

It was introduced in Pakistan by the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) government and passed through the Presidential assent on 19 August 2016. The act was officially aimed at tackling online crime, harassment, hacking, and unlawful online materials. Its major provisions having direct impact to journalism entail the following:

Section 20 makes it a crime to transmit information, which is false, indecent or which is likely to cause harm to the reputation of a person. Initial sentence was a maximum of three years in jail. This was to be increased to five years and be non-bailable, albeit later struck down by the Islamabad High Court as unconstitutional. The 2025 amendments have been very effective in reintroducing a similar restriction under a different category.

Section 26 sets the power of the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA), to block/remove any online content that can be considered prejudicial to the national security, public order, decency, or morality. There is no requirement of any court order. It is all up to administrative authorities, selected by the government, lacking any independent control. Section 37 also expands the

prerogative of the government in intercepting and blocking information transmissions.

In 2025, with what Reporters Without Borders termed indecent haste - passed by the National Assembly in less than fifteen minutes on 23 January 2025 and by the Senate on 28 January - introduced nine new categories of content banned. These come in the form of what is known as fabricated news, content which incites hatred and content that is deemed to threaten what is known as the public order.

The amendments further established four new regulatory bodies which included: the Social Media Protection and Regulatory Authority, Social Media Complaint Council, Social Media Protection Tribunals, and the National Cyber Crime Investigation Agency. They are all put into position by the federal government and they are not subject to independent scrutiny and even when they are appealed to, they bypass the High Courts and go directly to the Supreme Court instead, a time-consuming and prohibitively expensive way to go in any rate of ordinary journalist.

### **2.3 Legal Objections and the Trend towards Abuse.**

The constitutionality of PECA has been doubted on many occasions. The Islamabad High Court decided that the 2022 amendments violated the Constitution and invalidated the amendments. Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have cautioned that the criminal defamation provisions of the law go against the expectations of the Pakistani people on the provisions of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. The Pakistan Press Foundation (PPF) and the Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists (PFUJ) have continuously demanded the repeal or radical amendment of the law.

But the law has not been repealed. Instead it has been reinforced. The trend of misuse is well documented: journalists are not arrested because of hacking, phishing, but because of tweets, Facebook posts, YouTube videos, and WhatsApp messages. In February 2025, the Cyber Crime Reporting Centre of the Federal Investigation Agency registered FIRs under PECA against four women journalists including the Secretary of the Islamabad National

Press Club on discussing a personal dispute in a WhatsApp group. The cases were initiated without providing the journalists with the opportunity to give any counter-exploration.

## **3. Methodology**

### **3.1 Research Design and Approach.**

The study is based on mixed-method approach, involving quantitative analysis of survey and qualitative thematic analysis of in-depth interviews. The quantitative part will involve a questionnaire which is structured and will be given to 200 working journalists in three selected districts. The qualitative aspect is based on 24 semi-structured interviews with a purposely selected sample of respondents who accepted to talk in greater detail about their experiences.

The questions within the survey were aimed at measuring: (a) awareness of PECA and its provisions by the journalists involved; (b) first-hand experiences of legal threats or prosecution as a result of PECA; (c) changes in reporting behaviour attributable to PECA; (d) self-censorship practices; (e) perceptions of the impact of PECA on press freedom; and (f) the effect of PECA on digital and social media reporting in particular.

### **3.2 Location of the Study: Sargodha, Khushab and Islamabad.**

The choice of these three districts is also indicative of an effort to capture the media climate of the federal capital and the unique pressures facing journalists in smaller, more rural settings in Punjab. Islamabad (n=80): Pakistan federal capital is the location of a large concentration of national and international media organisations, press clubs, government press corps, and start up digital media organisations. The journalists in Islamabad will have a better chance to have institutional support, legal resources and visibility which not only exposes them to high profile PECA cases, but also empowers them with greater defenses.

Sargodha (n=70): A divisional headquarters in central Punjab with a population of about 3.6 million, Sargodha serves a large population of district-level reporters, radio correspondents, and online journalists to serve regional and national outlets. Its close proximity to military installations,

and its history of local political tensions make it a sensitive reporting environment.

Khushab (n=50): Khushab is a much smaller district in the north-central region of Punjab, and it plays host to some of the most sensitive installations in the country such as the plutonium production reactors of Pakistan and so on. The Khushab journalists are the most resource-limited and vulnerable group of the profession.

### 3.3 Sampling and Data Collection

The lists held by press clubs at Sargodha, Khushab and Islamabad were used to identify respondents through purposive sampling. Journalist networks were also used to obtain referrals to supplement purposive sampling. The overall sample of 200 was selected proportionally in accordance with the relative size and density of the media of each district. All the respondents were confirmed as working journalists, who are in print, broadcast, online or freelance reporting at the time of the survey.

The data were collected in the period between January, 2026 and April, 2026. The questionnaires were conducted face to face using trained research assistants where possible and via secure electronic forms where face to face interaction was not possible. All the respondents were assured of anonymity and no names have been used in this article. The in-depth interviews (24) were recorded with the consent of participants and transcribed and translated into English to be coded.

The data were analysed by applying descriptive statistics (quantitative data). The data were analyzed with chi-square tests to determine statistically significant differences in the areas of districts and gender subgroups. Inductive thematic coding was used to analyse qualitative data, with the codes coming out of the interview transcripts.

### 3.4 Ethical Considerations

Since the subject matter was quite sensitive (the respondents were being questioned about legally risky activities and their association with the law-enforcement agencies). All the participants provided informed consent. There was no information that would be used to identify the responses. All the electronic information was stored in encrypted servers. In cases where the respondents were worried about digital surveillance, paper-based surveys were conducted and data were inputted by the research team without the involvement of the respondents in digital platform. The name of any respondent, affiliation with any outlet, or contact details are not included in any published report of this study.

## 4. Survey Findings

### 4.1 Respondent Profile

The gender imbalance that has remained characteristic of the Pakistani journalism profession, especially beyond Islamabad has been reflected in the sample of 200 journalists in the survey, of which 153 men (76.5%), and 47 women (23.5%), were surveyed. With regard to primary medium, 72 respondents (36%) identified as digital/online journalists, 58 (29%) respondents as print journalists, 42 (21%) respondents as television and radio reporters and 28 (14%) respondents as freelancers working across multiple platforms. Most of the respondents (61 per cent) had employed longer than five years as a journalist with 29 per cent having a professional experience of more than ten years.

Table 1 shows the simple demographic survey of the sample of the three districts.

**Table 1: Respondent Profile by District**

Category	Sargodha (n=70)	Khushab (n=50)	Islamabad (n=80)
<b>Gender: Male</b>	54 (77%)	40 (80%)	59 (74%)
<b>Gender: Female</b>	16 (23%)	10 (20%)	21 (26%)
<b>Medium: Digital/Online</b>	24 (34%)	14 (28%)	34 (43%)
<b>Medium: Print</b>	21 (30%)	18 (36%)	19 (24%)

Category	Sargodha (n=70)	Khushab (n=50)	Islamabad (n=80)
Medium: TV / Radio	14 (20%)	9 (18%)	19 (24%)
Medium: Freelance	11 (16%)	9 (18%)	8 (10%)
Experience: 1–5 years	26 (37%)	20 (40%)	32 (40%)
Experience: 5–10 years	24 (34%)	17 (34%)	27 (34%)
Experience: >10 years	20 (29%)	13 (26%)	21 (26%)

#### 4.2 Awareness of PECA and Its Provisions

The analysis of the data was conducted based on the use of descriptive statistics (quantitative data). Chi-square tests were used to analyze the data in order to establish statistically significant differences in the areas of districts and gender subgroups. Inductive thematic coding was used to analyse qualitative data, with the codes coming out of the interview transcripts.

#### 3.4 Ethical Considerations

Since the subject matter was quite sensitive (the respondents were being questioned about legally risky activities and their association with the law-enforcement agencies). The informed consent of all the participants was obtained. There was no information that would be used to identify the responses. All the electronic information was stored in encrypted servers. When the respondents were concerned about digital surveillance, the survey was carried out on paper and data was entered by the research team without the respondents intervening

in digital platform. No published account of this research includes the name of any respondent, affiliation with any outlet or contact information.

### 4. Survey Findings

#### 4.1 Respondent Profile

The gender imbalance which has been a characteristic feature of the Pakistani journalism profession, at least beyond Islamabad has found its reflection in the sample of 200 journalists in the survey, of which 153 men (76.5%), and 47 women (23.5%), were surveyed. In terms of primary medium, 72 respondents (36 percent) identified as digital/online journalists, 58 respondents (29 percent) respondents as print journalists, 42 respondents (21 percent) respondents as television and radio reporters and 28 respondents (14 percent) respondents as freelancers who work across multiple platforms. Most of the respondents (61 per cent) had employed longer than five years as a journalist with 29 per cent having a professional experience of more than ten years.

Table 2: PECA Awareness Among Surveyed Journalists

Awareness Indicator	Sargodha (n=70)	Khushab (n=50)	Islamabad (n=80)
Aware PECA exists	65 (93%)	46 (92%)	76 (95%)
Know Section 20 details	36 (52%)	19 (38%)	49 (61%)
Know Section 26 (content blocking)	31 (44%)	16 (32%)	43 (54%)
Aware of 2025 amendments	28 (40%)	17 (34%)	37 (46%)
Know new regulatory bodies	17 (24%)	11 (22%)	28 (35%)

Awareness Indicator	Sargodha (n=70)	Khushab (n=50)	Islamabad (n=80)
Received PECA-related legal training	14 (20%)	8 (16%)	31 (39%)

#### 4.3 Direct Personal Experience of PECA-Related Threats or Prosecution

Out of the 200 respondents, 43 (21.5) said that they had personally received a legal notice, FIR, or formal warning under PECA or directly in relation to a digital content that they had produced. Another 67 (33.5) said that they had received informal threats, like phone calls, WhatsApp messages or in-person warnings, which they believed were linked to their digital reporting, even though no formal case was filed. Together, 55 per cent of the respondents reported having received some type of legal or quasi-legal pressure related to their digital journalism.

These highest rates were in Islamabad (58%), where more politically sensitive reporting is concentrated and hence the exposure is higher than in Sargodha (54%), and Khushab (48%). According to female journalists, disproportionately high levels of informal harassment were reported by female reporters: 72 percent of women surveyed (34 out of 47) reported having received threats or harassment connected to their digital reporting, compared to 50 percent of men surveyed. This is in line with national-level results in 2026 in the annual report of Freedom Network, which reported the gendered aspects of PECA misuse.

Table 3: Direct Experience of PECA-Related Pressure

Type of Pressure	Sargodha (n=70)	Khushab (n=50)	Islamabad (n=80)
Formal FIR / Legal Notice Filed	13 (19%)	9 (18%)	21 (26%)
Informal Threat (call/message)	25 (36%)	15 (30%)	27 (34%)
Summoned by FIA / Police	7 (10%)	5 (10%)	11 (14%)
Social Media Account Suspended	9 (13%)	6 (12%)	13 (16%)
Story Forced to be Deleted	18 (26%)	14 (28%)	16 (20%)
No Experience of Any Pressure	32 (46%)	26 (52%)	34 (43%)

#### 4.4 Self-Censorship and Changes in Reporting Behaviour

The most important piece of information found in the survey is connected with self-censorship. On a question whether they had left out or misreported a subject because they were concerned about PECA or other legal effects, 156 of 200 respondents (78%) indicated that they had done so. This figure is also consistent across all three districts with the rate in Khushab (82%) being slightly higher than in Sargodha (79%) and Islamabad (75%), which suggests that the chilling effect of PECA is not merely a product of high-profile urban cases but felt

by equally high or higher rates across smaller districts where legal resources are more sparse. When queried to specify what topics they had avoided, the most common answers were criticism of state institutions and security agencies (64%), coverage of the activities of the political opposition (57%), local land disputes and cases of corruption (51%), coverage of protests and civil unrest (49%), and religious or sectarian issues (45%). Notably, 38 percent of respondents said that they avoid stories about government officials or local civil servants at the local level - a finding that has a far-reaching

implication on accountability journalism at the local level.

The changes in digital reporting practices were also common news. Sixty-nine percent of the interviewed respondents said they would no longer mention officials by name in their postings in the social media even though they would see the names of the officials in their print versions of the same stories.

Sixty-three percent of those surveyed said that they decreased the number of times per week that they posted on social media. Half of them (55 percent) reported that they no longer post stories in WhatsApp groups. And 48% said they were using encrypted communication tools in the first time since the PECA amendments which came into force in 2025.

**Table 4: Self-Censorship Rates by Topic Category**

Topic Avoided	Sargodha (n=70)	Khushab (n=50)	Islamabad (n=80)
Criticism of security agencies	43 (61%)	33 (66%)	52 (65%)
Political opposition coverage	37 (53%)	30 (60%)	47 (59%)
Local corruption / land disputes	38 (54%)	28 (56%)	36 (45%)
Protest / civil unrest coverage	34 (49%)	26 (52%)	38 (48%)
Religious / sectarian issues	32 (46%)	24 (48%)	34 (43%)
Local official accountability	29 (41%)	23 (46%)	24 (30%)
Women's rights issues	21 (30%)	17 (34%)	18 (23%)

**Table 5: Changes in Digital Reporting Practices**

Practice Changed / Adopted	Sargodha (n=70)	Khushab (n=50)	Islamabad (n=80)
Avoid naming officials on social media	47 (67%)	36 (72%)	55 (69%)
Reduced social media posting frequency	44 (63%)	32 (64%)	50 (63%)
Stopped sharing stories on WhatsApp	38 (54%)	28 (56%)	44 (55%)
Adopted encrypted communications	27 (39%)	19 (38%)	50 (63%)
Deleted previously published content	31 (44%)	24 (48%)	35 (44%)
Avoided live-streaming of events	29 (41%)	22 (44%)	31 (39%)
Changed social media privacy settings	52 (74%)	37 (74%)	64 (80%)

#### 4.5 Psychological Impact and Professional Morale

Not to mention the immediate alterations in the reporting practices, the survey also showed that there were serious psychological repercussions of PECA-related anxiety. When the respondents were asked to rate their level of stress about digital reporting on a scale of 1-5, the mean score of 3.9 was registered among all the respondents with female journalists registering a higher mean of 4.3. Eighty-one percent of the surveyed people gave a description of their work environment as being more threatening than it was five years ago. Sixty-

seven percent indicated that they had at some point during the last twelve months considered leaving the profession, or reducing their professional activity.

These figures were even greater among women journalists: 87% of them said that the environment was more threatening, 78% of them had considered leaving or reducing their activity, and 64% of them said that online harassment, including threats of sexual violence posted through digital platforms, often became a significant influence on their professional decisions.

**Table 6: Psychological Impact on Journalists**

Impact Indicator	Sargodha (n=70)	Khushab (n=50)	Islamabad (n=80)
Reported high stress (score 4–5/5)	52 (74%)	40 (80%)	60 (75%)
Considered leaving journalism	46 (66%)	35 (70%)	53 (66%)
Environment more threatening than 5yr ago	55 (79%)	42 (84%)	65 (81%)
Experienced anxiety / fear of prosecution	57 (81%)	41 (82%)	64 (80%)
Sought mental health support	8 (11%)	5 (10%)	19 (24%)
Would recommend journalism as career	22 (31%)	14 (28%)	32 (40%)

#### 4.6 Views on PECA's Impact on Press Freedom

The respondents were requested to give a general evaluation of the effects of PECA on the journalism and press freedom in Pakistan. Ninety-one percent of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that PECA has adversely affected the freedom of press. Eighty-six percent of respondents agreed that PECA is being utilized more as a means to curtail critics and journalists as opposed to addressing actual cybercrime. Eighty-three percent of the respondents

had said that things were now much worse under the amendments of 2025.

A low percentage of 7% of respondents concurred that PECA is a legitimate, necessary function in combating harmful online content and only 5% were sure that the law was fairly and without political bias being applied. These findings indicate a close-to-total breakdown of professional belief in the jurisprudential system that regulates online expression in Pakistan.

Table 7: Journalists' Overall Assessment of PECA (All Respondents, n=200)

Statement	Agree/Strongly Agree	Neutral	Disagree/Strongly Disagree
PECA harms press freedom	182 (91%)	9 (5%)	9 (5%)
PECA used to silence critics	172 (86%)	14 (7%)	14 (7%)
2025 amendments made things worse	166 (83%)	18 (9%)	16 (8%)
PECA serves a legitimate function	14 (7%)	22 (11%)	164 (82%)
PECA is applied fairly	10 (5%)	16 (8%)	174 (87%)
PECA should be fundamentally reformed	178 (89%)	14 (7%)	8 (4%)
PECA should be repealed entirely	141 (71%)	31 (16%)	28 (14%)

### 5. Voices from the Field: Qualitative Findings

The semi-structured interviews, 24 of which were carried out in the context of this study, provided a rich source of qualitative data that puts textures and human aspects on the statistical trends identified above. All names are not disclosed; the respondents are designated by district, beat and gender. The following were the themes that appeared throughout the interviews.

#### 5.1 The Midnight Phone Call

Several interviewees reported receiving unsolicited phone calls (some in the middle of the night) by people who identified themselves as government officials, law enforcement officers, or simply refused to identify themselves, threatening the journalist about published material or stories to come. One of the senior district reporters at Sargodha has put the experience into the following terms: You publish a story about local official misusing funds. Two days after, you receive a call. No threats, exactly. Just questions. Who informed you of this? Do you have documents? Do you know PECA? It is created so that you realize that you are being observed, and that your cell phone is not your own. This was echoed in one or another of the interviewees in both Sargodha and Khushab, where there is no institutional

support, such informal pressure is particularly effective.

#### 5.2 Mathematics of Risk in Smaller Districts.

One of the freelance reporters based in Khushab, gave a depressing account of what she believes is now called the economic calculation by which she makes her choices in the company of Khushab journalists: His charges begin with fifty thousand rupees in case of the first appearance. I earn thirty thousand rupees a month. Therefore when somebody has even filed a false PECA case against me, I am done. I cannot fight it. So I do not write those things that can make anybody feel bad. I write of schemes of development, of agriculture, of such things as no one will complain of. This story is an example of how the legal cost of legal defence, even in a case that may ultimately be struck out, is a mild disincentive as far as the legal merit of any particular prosecution is concerned.

#### 5.3 Digital Archive as Evidence.

A number of the respondents explained a new anxiety that is peculiar to the digital age: how permanent the online archive will be. A television journalist in Islamabad clarified: 'In pre digital journalism, what you said on television was lost

when the broadcast was over, unless a person was deliberate in recording it. All the things that I have ever tweeted, all the Facebook posts that I made five years ago, all the comments, it is all there on YouTube. And PECA offers the possibility of filing a case regarding content published many years prior to the case being registered. No time restriction to secure you.' This fear of retrospective prosecution, as upheld by legal experts, as a real risk in the current statute, is what has given rise to many reporters conducting large scale audits of their past digital output, and deleting material they now view as dangerous.

#### **5.4 Women Journalists: A Complex Vulnerability.**

The female respondents expressed a compound vulnerability that involved the general PECA risks that all journalists were vulnerable to, with gendered risks particular to women in public-facing digital jobs. In one case, a digital correspondent of Sargodha reported receiving sexually explicit threats in various social media outlets after publishing an investigative story about a local authority: 'When I reported the harassment to the FIA, they asked me to provide evidence that I had not precipitated the threats myself. The agency that is expected to enforce PECA treated me like I was the suspect. This is what we as women journalists are. This two-tiered approach, which is to use PECA to prosecute women journalists whereas the law enforcing this practice fails to apply it in cases involving men who harass women, was brought up by several female interviewees in all three districts.

#### **High Exposure, Higher Resources, Similar Fear**

##### **5.5 Islamabad: High Exposure, Higher Resources, Similar Fear**

Describing their own specific kinds of vulnerability, Islamabad-based journalists, though better resourced and connected, described their own particular kinds of vulnerability. A federal institutions investigative reporter explained how the 2025 amendments affect the relationships between sources: My sources in ministries are terrified now. They used to call me. Now they do not. They have witnessed what has befallen their colleagues who leak information. PECA implies that it is possible to track down a leaked document, a screenshot, a voice

note – all of them can be used to get a case. My capacity to perform accountability journalism is solely based on the people who are ready to take such a risk. Less and less of them are disposed to.' The second-order impact of PECA that does not necessarily manifest itself in prosecution statistics but severely undermines the quality and depth of public interest journalism, is the erosion of source networks, the lifeblood of investigative reporting.

#### **6. Situating the Survey within Pakistan's National Press Freedom Crisis**

The results of this research are not unique phenomena. They echo and cement a well-documented trend of media freedom decline on national grounds. The most recent assessment is that of Freedom Network in their April 2026 annual report, 'Regulatory Repression of Freedom of Expression: Legal Controls and PECA Undermine Media and Journalism in Pakistan.' The report recognizes PECA as the most consequential tool of press restriction currently in operation in Pakistan, and documents 129 verified violations against journalists in the twelve months between April 2025 to March 2026, of which two are murders, 58 PECA-invoked legal proceedings, 16 cases of physical assault, 11 cases of intimidation of harm, and two cases of enforced disappearance.

In almost 60 percent of instances, state actors were found to be the main offenders of violations. Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa turned out to be the most hostile of the places where working journalists had to work - a result that is directly relevant to this sample of the research, which is based entirely in Punjab and the federal capital. The main finding of the report, summarised by Freedom Network Executive Director Iqbal Khattak, is that PECA has been weaponised such that it has created a climate of fear where journalists now feel compelled to self-censor to avoid the legal consequences of such action, which is one of the most serious threats to media freedom in Pakistan today.

The declining press freedom in Pakistan is indicated in the world ratings. In the 2025 World Press Freedom Index released by Reporters Without Borders, Pakistan has dropped to the 158th of 180 countries the country has not scored this low in years. RSF has pointed out that Pakistan is among

the most unsafe nations in the world with regards to journalists, and that violence in the nation most of the time goes unpunished and the government has direct control over media regulators in the country. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), more than 90 journalists have been murdered in Pakistan since 2000 and most of the cases remain unresolved and the perpetrators have gone unpunished. Drawing on its own data, the Commonwealth Journalists Association has put the total at 168 deaths of journalists since 2000, and the majority of which occurred in rural districts and small towns - the very constituencies that this study represents.

Of particular concern to the International Press Institute (IPI) has been the absence of exemptions on journalistic activities in the revised provisions of PECA, and this has been noted to have no meaningful judicial review. The IFJ and its Pakistani affiliate PFUJ have called for the law's draconian provisions to be repealed. PECA has been described by Amnesty International as a tool of silencing the freedom of expression in the name of fighting fake news, cybercrime and misinformation. RSF has demanded an immediate repeal of PECA and its amendments which it has described as a dangerous weapon in the hands of authorities who can use them to silence critics and control information.

#### **7. Discussion: Since Cybersecurity Statute to Instrument of Repression.**

The findings of this study validate what media freedom organisations have been warning since the enactment of PECA in 2016: the legislation has since the passing of PECA in 2016 evolved into a comprehensive system of silencing independent journalism. The evolution has been achieved in three overlapping processes.

First, by intentional expansion of the law. The amendments of 2025, which were pushed through the National Assembly in less than fifteen minutes with no substantive consultation with stakeholders, dramatically expanded the scope of the law and created new regulatory bodies, which were intended to enforce preferences of the government in terms of content without judicial review. Second, by selective prosecution. An observed pattern of PECA cases, is that they are disproportionately filed against

journalists who covered politically sensitive topics - criticism of state institutions, coverage of opposition activities, accountability journalism at the local level - over the criminals who are actually targeted by the law.

Third, and most sinisterly, by the chilling effect. Criminal prosecutions based on PECA do not need to lead to a conviction to realize their objectives. The very process of registration of an FIR imposes huge costs on journalists in the form of legal fees, reputational damage, time opportunity costs incurred in the reporting process, and sends signals to other members of the profession that this or that topic is taboo. The data obtained in the survey that is presented hereunder confirms that this mechanism is functioning with such a devastating success. A majority of the respondents are systematic self-censorship users (78 percent). Eighty one percent documentary report that they fear prosecution as an active element in their daily editorial judgement. They are not the features of a free press which exists under the rule of the law; they are the features of a press which exists under a system of controlled censorship.

The geographical picture that this study shows introduces a significant component to the national picture. The legal risks which rural journalists in Khushab and Sargodha face are the same as those faced by their counterparts in Islamabad but with much less resources available to address them. The lack of legal assistance, the smaller professional networks, the higher social visibility in smaller communities are all contributors to the chilling effect of PECA that accumulate national data tends to mask. The press freedom story in Pakistan can not be told on the high profile cases of press freedom in Urban areas; it has to be told through the unreported cases, the deleted posts, and the abandoned investigations on the thousands of journalists in Pakistan working in the districts.

#### **8. Policy Recommendations**

The results of this research are not unique phenomena. They resonate and solidify an extensively recorded movement of decline in media freedom on nationalist basis. The latest analysis is that of Freedom Network of their April 2026 annual report, Regulatory Repression of Freedom of

Expression: Legal Controls and PECA Undermine Media and Journalism in Pakistan. The report identifies PECA as the most significant tool of press restriction currently operational in Pakistan, and documents 129 of verified violations of journalists in the twelve months between April 2025 to March 2026, of which two are cases of murder.

In almost 60 percent of instances, state actors were found to be the main offenders of violations. Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa proved to be the most unfriendly of the locales where working journalists had to work - a fact which is directly relevant to this sample of the research, which is entirely based in Punjab and the federal capital. The key conclusion of the report, which has been summarized by Freedom Network Executive Director Iqbal Khattak, is that PECA has been weaponised such that it now creates a climate of fear whereby journalists are now feeling compelled to self-censor to avoid the legal consequences of such action which is one of the gravest threats to media freedom in Pakistan today.

The declining press freedom in Pakistan is indicated in the world ratings. In the 2025 World Press Freedom Index that Reporters Without Borders released, Pakistan has fallen to the 158th of 180 countries that the country has not scored this low in years. RSF has highlighted the fact that Pakistan is one of the most insecure states in the world as far as journalists are concerned and that violence in the country most of the time remains unpunished and that the government has a direct control over media regulators in the country. The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) estimates that over 90 journalists have been murdered in Pakistan since 2000 and most of the cases have not been resolved and the offenders remain unpunished. Using its own data, the Commonwealth Journalists Association has estimated the total number of journalist deaths since 2000 at 168 and most of the number of which have been in rural districts and small towns - where this study represents the constituency.

Specifically of interest to the International Press Institute (IPI) has been the lack of exemptions on journalistic activities in the revised provisions of PECA and this has been observed to have no meaningful judicial review. The IFJ and its Pakistani counterpart PFUJ have urged to have the draconian

provisions of the law repealed. PECA has been characterized by the Amnesty International as a gagging device against the freedom of expression in the guise of combating fake news, computer crimes and misinformation. RSF has called on the government to repeal PECA and its amendments which it has described as a dangerous weapon in the hands of authorities who can use them to silence critics and control information.

### **7. Discussion: Because Cybersecurity Statute to Instrument of Repression.**

The results of this paper confirm what the media freedom organizations have been crying foul since the enactment of PECA in 2016: the law has since the enactment of PECA in 2016 evolved into a comprehensive system of silencing independent journalism. The three overlapping processes have been used to bring to fruition the evolution.

Originally, through deliberate broadening of the law. The amendments of 2025 that were rushed through the National Assembly in less than fifteen minutes with no material consultation with stakeholders dramatically expanded the scope of the law and created new regulatory bodies, which were destined to enforce preferences of the government in terms of content without judicial review. Second, by selective prosecution. A noted trend of PECA cases, is that they are disproportionately filed against journalists who reported on politically sensitive issues - criticism of state institutions, coverage of opposition activities, accountability journalism at the local level - over the criminals who are in actuality targeted by the law.

Third, and most diabolically, by the chilling effect. PECA-based criminal prosecutions need not result in a conviction to achieve their goals. Even the process of registration of an FIR presents enormous expenditures on journalists in the shape of legal fees, reputational damage, opportunity cost of time lost in the reporting process, and sends signals to other members of the profession that this or that subject matter is a taboo. The results obtained in the survey which is provided hereunder confirm that such a devastating success is being achieved by this mechanism. Most of the interviewees are systematic users of self-censorship (78 percent). Eighty one percent documentary report that they fear

prosecution as an active part in their daily editorial judgement. These are not the characteristics of a free press which lives under a rule of the law; those are the characteristics of a press which lives under a system of checked censorship.

The geographical image that this paper reveals adds a considerable element to the national image. The legal risks that rural journalists in Khushab and Sargodha have to deal with are the same as those of their colleagues in Islamabad only to have much less resources at their disposal to help them overcome them. The absence of legal assistance, the smaller professional networks, the greater social view in smaller communities are all factors that contribute to the chilling effect of PECA that gathers national data. The press freedom story in Pakistan cannot be told on the high profile cases of press freedom in the Urban areas; it has to be told in the unreported cases, the deleted post and the abandoned investigation on the thousands of journalists in Pakistan working in the districts.

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