

## EXPLORING SECURITY RISKS AND PRESS FREEDOM CHALLENGES FOR JOURNALISTS IN PAKISTAN

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### ABSTRACT

*This study examines the varied security challenges confronted by journalists in Pakistan, indicating how censorship extrinsic pressures, and the misuse of regulatory frameworks sabotage press freedom. Using a qualitative research design, the study frames in-depth interviews with journalists to explore their experiences. Findings show that journalists routinely encounter censorship, particularly when reporting on national security, political corruption, or organized crime. Such reporting often exposes them to anger, threats, and life-endangering situations, especially for field reporters who receive borderline institutional protection. Respondents emphasized that legal instruments such as the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) 2016, though intended to curb unethical journalistic practices, and are frequently weaponized through defamation charges to silence critical voices. This legal misuse contributes to a scary effect on investigative journalism and respondents verbalized concern about growing bias within mainstream media, driven by organizational interests and political association, which further damage objectivity and public trust while citizen journalism offers an alternative approach for independent reporting, it lacks structural support and carries important safety risks. The study tells that without wide-ranging reforms to strengthen legal protections and address institutional weaknesses, the future of independent and ethical journalism remains uncertain.*

**Keywords:** Security, Challenges, Journalists, Pakistan, Targeted, Freedom

### INTRODUCTION

Journalism has grown to be one of the hazardous jobs in the world over the last few decades. According to news and data from all over the world, reporters are targeted on a daily basis for their work. The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) recognizes a range of violent acts against journalists, such as killings, kidnappings, intimidation, harassment, and wrongful arrests and detentions. UNESCO has been working to support free and independent media and has a specific mandate to promote the free exchange of ideas and expression (UNESCO, C&I, 2016).

Journalism plays an important role in firming democracy and apprising the public, yet journalists in Pakistan remain to face serious security and

professional challenges. Subjects such as censorship, political pressure, threats, and harassment have created a tough environment for independent reporting, especially on sensitive topics like corruption and national security. Since Pakistan had the worst number of journalist fatalities in the world from 2000 to 2021, conflict, violence, and extremism have made journalism one of the most challenging professions to practice their recently (Rehmat, 2014). According to Jamil (2017), Pakistani journalists labor in an unsafe institutional setting where a variety of safety threats may have an impact on both their output and the nation's overall standard of journalism. According to the study's findings, in addition to other concerns, journalists may also experience psychological, financial, emotional, and digital

risks at work. The study has highlighted social and emotional hazards that are frequently ignored by international groups tasked with monitoring Pakistani journalists' levels of safety.

Assuring the physical and emotional health of journalists is one of today's most critical challenges, according to UNESCO, and it has a direct bearing on press freedom, information freedom, and sustainable development. Therefore, guaranteeing the safety of journalists both online and offline was one of the three various issues and approaches to assess the global press freedom situation in 2016. (UNESCO, 2016).

The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) actively advocates for the safety of media professionals and believes that they have a right to work freely without fear of violence. Additionally, UNESCO works to uphold everyone's right to freedom of thought and expression (UNESCO, C&I, 2016). The group contends that impunity for journalistic murders has a direct bearing on the UN's human rights-based initiatives to advance stability, safety, and sustainable development. The majority of violence against journalists is not investigated, and those responsible are rarely brought to justice, which feeds the cycle of violence and causes media to self-censor, which restricts press freedom and robs the public of information (UNESCO, C&I, 2016).

Reporters Without Borders (RSF) and its affiliate Freedom Network (FN) welcome Sindh province's legislative assembly for enacting a law protecting journalists, but they recommend significant changes that need to be made to the bill before it is implemented (Alam, 2015).

The primary part of the new law, which the Sindh assembly unanimously approved on May 28, states that no individual or organization, whether private or public, shall engage in any action that violates or threatens the right to life and security of any journalist or media professional. While purporting to defend reporters, Pakistani legislation is utilized to forbid any criticism of the government and military. The 2002-founded Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) is more concerned with regulating the media's published content than it is with

regulating the media business. In addition to fighting online crime, the 2016 Prevention of electronic crimes Act (PECA) was passed to limit online free speech. The Protection of Journalists and Media Professional Act, passed in 2021, stipulates a precise "behavior" that journalists must adhere to be protected. These imprecise regulations expose journalists who cross the government's implicit lines to severe administrative and criminal penalties, including up to three years in prison for "sedition."

Reporters Without Borders denounced a strict revision to Pakistan's law combatting internet misinformation (RSF). If the Supreme Court does not reverse it, RSF claims that it will provide the government and armed forces with a new tool for ruthless censorship.

Section 20 of the 2016 Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA), which makes posting "false news" regarding the armed forces, courts, or public authorities illegal, is amended by the ordinance. This PECA clause has historically been utilized by the government to intimidate journalists who ventured to exceed the implied "red lines" of the regime.

In Pakistan, a media outlet typically chooses not to cover an attack on a journalist who works for a rival outlet. Only extraordinary events, like the failed assassination attempt on Geo TV journalist Hamid Mir in April 2014, are ever documented as incidents. Follow-up articles from media sources, particularly those whose journalist was attacked, are even less common. High-profile cases are an exception, like Wali Khan Babar, for whom the parent company of Geo TV never stopped seeking justice. (Rehmat, 2013-2014)

This opinion was mirrored by journalists' who were questioned in four provinces of Pakistan. When it comes to ensuring the safety of its reporters, media organizations do not cooperate. There is hardly any media coverage of safety and impunity, particularly in follow-up articles on attacked journalists from other media outlets. Even with organizations that have experienced personnel losses due to attacks, coverage is not sustained, and there are hardly any follow-up

articles because the instances do not result in trials or sanctions. (Rehmat, 2013-14)

### Research Objectives

- To study the perception of journalistic causes of insecurity for the journalist community
- To analyze the journalist feedback on weak media coverage of journalistic safety issues as media bias, media commercialization or desensitization of media organization.

### Research Question

- What is the status of Pakistan's independent and private media infrastructure in terms of protecting journalistic expression, and what kinds of stories make journalists feel uneasy?
- How do journalists in Pakistan describe insecurity and impunity culture and how do journalists define the role of media organizations in the security of journalistic expression?

### Literature Review

The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), International News Safety Institute (INSI), Reporters Sans Frontiers (RSF), and other organizations that work to protect journalists' rights around the world frequently release reports that include information and data on violations of journalists' rights and threats to their safety. Data and information regarding different forms of violence against journalists in Pakistan will be covered in the section.

Since there has been violence against journalists and the media for more than ten years, almost all relevant parties, including the national and international communities, are now at least somewhat aware of the severity of the threats to journalists' safety and the impunity of such crimes in Pakistan. It is well known that journalism is a challenging industry in this nation. Since 1992, the CPJ has placed Pakistan as one of the top 10 most hazardous countries in the world to work as a journalist. Additionally, Pakistan has a relatively

high level of impunity for crimes against journalists. (Alam, 2015)

Since January 2000, nearly 2,000 journalists have reported encounters with harassment, intimidation, kidnapping, arrest, incarceration, assault, and injury, according to data from PFUJ, Civic Action Resources (CAR), and Freedom Network (FN). That equates to 6 cases every month or 166 cases on average per year over 12 years. (Alam, 2015)

When the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, took place, the vast bulk of Pakistan's media outlets did not yet exist, and Pakistan's position has been impacted by what is happening in neighboring Afghanistan. The media was impacted by these events as they increased coverage of the ensuing violence and the several actors participating in it. In Pakistan, the number of radio stations increased from one state-owned network to over 150 by the middle of 2014, while the number of TV channels increased from one state-owned network in 2002 to approximately 100 in 2012. At the time of writing, there were more than 18,000 journalists in the group, with a majority of them men. This growth has exposed many of them to a range of threats.

Reporters Without Borders (RSF) and its member, Freedom Network (FN), applauded the legislative assembly of Sindh province in southern Pakistan for passing a law safeguarding journalists called 'The Sindh Protection of Journalists and other Media Practitioners Act, 2021' but they suggest important amendments that should be made to the bill before it is put into effect. (Alam 2015)

A harsh amendment to Pakistan's law combating internet misinformation was condemned by Reporters Without Borders (RSF). According to RSF, it will give the government and armed forces a new tool for relentless censorship if the Supreme Court does not overturn it.

The ordinance amends Section 20 of the 2016 Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA), which penalizes posting "fake news" about the armed forces, judiciary, or public officials. The authorities have previously frequently used this section of the PECA to silence journalists who dared to cross the implicit "red lines" of the regime. Since the change makes internet defamation a

strictly criminal offense, persons accused will not be eligible for release on bail before trial. Even worse, it will eliminate any chance of a civil settlement between the plaintiff and defendant eliminating the necessity of a criminal trial.

According to CPJ, since 1992, Pakistan has been the world's most dangerous country for journalists, with 23 journalists losing their lives on risky assignments there (Ricchiardi, 2012). Freedom House rated Pakistani media as unfree in its 2012 Press Freedom Report, giving it a score of 63. Out of 197 countries, it moved up to 144th place from 134th last year (Ricchiardi, 2012). The public's right to information and Pakistani journalists' right to protection must be balanced (Rehmat, 2014). Local journalists not only risk death on a regular basis, but they also face mistrust from the public and authorities (Aslam, 2011).

In recent years, conflict, violence, and extremism have made Pakistan's media industry one of the most challenging in the world, with Pakistan posting the highest rate of journalist fatalities from 2000 to 2014. (Rehmat, 2014). According to Jamil (2017), Pakistani journalists operate in an unstable institutional framework where a variety of security risks may have an impact on both their job and the nation's general standard of journalism. According to the study's findings, journalists also confront psychological, financial, emotional, and digital hazards while at work in addition to physical ones. The report specifically calls attention to social and emotional hazards that are frequently disregarded by foreign organizations keeping track of the amount of safety afforded to journalists in Pakistan.

According to a report by the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), at least 60 journalists have been slain in Pakistan since 1992 for reasons that have been formally acknowledged. The reasons for the murders of 20 additional journalists within the same time frame remain unknown. The overall number of journalists slain since 1992 now stands at 87. In addition, seven media professionals have died since 2009. Others, like Rehmat (2014), predict that between 2000 and the beginning of 2014, more than 100 journalists and media workers were killed and more than 2000 injured across the nation, with the KP and FATA region (24), Balochistan (15), Sindh (14), Punjab (6), and

the federal capital Islamabad (1) ranked in second and third, respectively.

According to the Pakistan Press Report Foundation's (PPF) 2015 report on media worker safety, Pakistani journalists suffer considerable threats from law enforcement, political, religious, ethnic, other interest groups in addition to extremists. As per the report, the culture of impunity has made the status of journalists there even more perilous due to ongoing threats, assaults, and murders. Many journalists in tribal communities are compelled to leave their hometowns or resign (Ashraf & Broughton, 2017; IMS, 2009). Freedom House (2016) reports that although the number of journalistic homicides has declined considerably in recent times, the quantity and severity of threats made against journalists by different state and non-state entities, including the government, extremists, military, and secret service organizations continued to be numerous. When writing about the poor living conditions for farmers and the misappropriation of funding and resources by politicians and other powerful individuals, journalists in rural areas frequently receive threats (Bhattacharyya, 2015).

The Council of Newspaper Editors of Pakistan (CPNE) declared in a press release that the Pakistani media community has decided to adopt national norms and rules for the security of media people, referring to it as "the protection of press houses and media professionals." declared a landmark. After the stakeholders' meeting, the CPNE, in partnership with the Freedom Network (FN), said in a statement that the guidelines and protocols will "offer a self-regulatory charter with three main safeguards specified as global norms, namely prevention, protection, and law enforcement." In the amendment to the PECA ordinance, 2022 will make it possible for anybody or any entity to initiate a defamation complaint, even if they have no relationship with the claimed subject of the defamation. To put it another way, any political activist will have the right to file a defamation lawsuit against a journalist they believe is unfairly critical of the government or military, for instance. A complaint like that could imprison journalists right away (RSF, n.d).

Although the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and Article 19 of the Pakistani

Constitution guarantee freedom of expression and a free press, the media in Pakistan continues to be restrained or subject to severe physical intimidation, such as killings and self-censorship regime during 2019.

Article 19 and Article 19-A stated that Every citizen shall have the right to freedom of speech and expression, as well as freedom of the press, subject to any reasonable restrictions imposed by the law in the interest of Islam, the integrity, security, or defense of Pakistan, or any portion thereof, friendly relations with foreign states, public order, decency, or morality, or in relation to contempt of court, defamation, or incitement to an offence.

#### **Cyber Crime Law (Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act 2016-PECA)**

The administration of the late former prime minister Nawaz Sharif unveiled the Cybercrime Act - Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA), which it said would address online abuse and electronic crimes. On the other hand, the same statute was utilized in some capacity in 2019 against freedom of the press and freedom of expression.

Journalists in Pakistan frequently face defamation charges through various ordinances such as PECA, 2016, Anti-Terrorism Act and defamation ordinances under the Pakistan Penal Code. These journalists who are arrested on charges of defamation and sedition are often critical of the government which includes, politicians, armed forces and the judiciary. For example, journalist Shabir siham was summoned by an anti-terrorism court in Pakistan's northern Gilgit-Baltistan region for a hearing on October 7, 2017 on accusations of fabrication and extorting a regional minister in violation of Pakistan's Anti-Terrorism Act (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2017). According to the news site Dawn, Gilgit-Baltistan regional authorities brought charges against Siham after he wrote an unflattering column about members of the regional legislative assembly.

Critics say Pakistan's Anti-Terrorism Act, which includes language defining terrorism as "creating a sense of fear or insecurity in society," is too sweeping and has broad potential for abuse. Moreover in 2020 journalist Bilal Farooqi who is a

well-known critic of the military and extremist groups was arrested for defamation as he posted content online which was critical of the Pakistan army.

The Islamabad-based journalist Asad Toor has also faced legal action and a physical attack for his work. In September 2020, authorities accused him of "propagating against the army and the state." When charges were filed, Toor says the privately owned TV channel he worked for terminated his contract.

When furious organized mobs attacked the daily Dawn's offices in Islamabad and Karachi, it came under intense criticism for its articles and substance. While rude remarks were made about Dawn's management, especially its editor Zafar Abbas.

Unknown assailants shot and killed social media activist Anwar Jan Khetran on July 23, 2020, at around 530 p.m. in the Neharkot area of the Barkhan province of Balochistan, for posing difficult questions on his social media platforms. DC The activist's murder was confirmed by Barkhan, who added that the body had been transferred to a hospital and that "investigation is ongoing." He has written mostly about corruption in Barkhan and the province minister Sardar Abdul Rahman Khetran's development initiatives. The late worker's brother mentioned Balochistan Minister Sardar Abdul Rehman and his bodyguards in the initial intelligence report. The minister refuted the charge. The defendants had not been apprehended by the levy as of July 31, 2020.

Matiullah Jan, a senior journalist and social media activist, was hauled up by individuals outside a school in Islamabad on July 21, 2020, following the Supreme Court's service of a notice of contempt for his use of a Twitter handle. His wife corroborated this. Twelve hours after being abandoned near Islamabad, he went home. The following tweet from his Twitter account was allegedly sent by his son: "Matiullah, my father, has been abducted from the heart of the capital [Islamabad]." later the journalist posted a video on his YouTube page explaining what occurred to him during the 12-hour kidnapping. The journalist, who was renowned for his probing inquiries, claimed that the Sumoto case before the

Supreme Court was connected to his kidnapping. CCTV footage from the school where she was taken shows someone picking her up in a police-style car while wearing police gear. On July 15, 2020, the Pakistani Supreme Court ruled that Matiullah Jan was in "contempt of court" for his tweet that criticised the views of seven other judges in a case involving a fellow Supreme Court justice. In Pakistan, a media outlet's typical response to an attack on a journalist who works for a competing outlet is not to report the incident. An incident is only ever recorded under exceptional circumstances, like the botched assassination attempt on Geo TV journalist Hamid Mir in April 2014. Even less common are follow-up pieces from media outlets, including their own journalists who were attacked. High-profile instances are an exception, such as Wali Khan Babar, for which Geo TV's parent corporation continued to fight for justice. (Rehmat, 2013-14)

This opinion was mirrored by journalists' representatives who were questioned in four provinces.

When it comes to ensuring the safety of its reporters, media organizations do not cooperate. There is hardly any media coverage of safety and impunity, particularly in follow-up articles on attacked journalists from other media outlets. Even with organizations that have experienced personnel losses due to attacks, coverage is not sustained, and there are hardly any follow-up articles because the instances do not result in trials or sanctions. (Rehmat, 2013-14)

The level of corporate rivalry in Pakistan is too high for the media to come to a firm consensus on the subject of safety and immunity. The divide between media owners and media professionals as well as the rift within each of their distinct ranks define the Pakistani media landscape. At the time of writing, there are three factions within the PFUJ, the national federation of working journalists, which represents the nation's 18,000 journalists.

Due to GeoTV's coverage of the bombing against Hamid Mir in April 2014, the PBA, the nation's representative organisation for the independent television sector (which includes more than 60 television stations), also abruptly disaffiliated. In a smear campaign against the media company, the

majority of Geo TV's rivals, including ARY TV, Dunya TV, and Express TV, claimed that the attack on Hamid Mir was preplanned by the security establishment.

The expansive and intricate media landscape of Pakistan is divided over the need for a common strategy to end impunity. The pursuit of justice is widely supported, but among media owners, media managers, and media practitioners, strategy and tactics are divided along sectoral lines. Distinct media players have different voices and tones, which has an impact on how they treat issues related to journalist safety. The most effective supporters of journalists' rights are journalists' unions, yet these groups are dispersed, and their combined voices now conflict. Similar to this, media groups like PBA, Council of Pakistan Newspaper Editors (CPNE), and All Pakistan Newspaper Society (APNS) are separated by their lack of uniform position on the subject of journalist security. Media attackers gain from this split within the larger media community since they can then operate freely.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) vigorously advocates for the protection of media workers and journalists, believing that they should be able to conduct their jobs without fear of physical harm. Everyone has the right to express themselves freely, and this right is guaranteed (UNESCO, C&I, 2016). The group thinks that the UN's human rights-based initiatives for peace, security, and sustainable development are directly impacted by the murder and impunity of journalists. Press freedom is impeded by the fact that the majority of violent crimes against journalists go uninvestigated and unpunished, which feeds a cycle of violence and causes the media to self-censor. puts and denies information to the public (UNESCO, C&I, 2016).

The UN General Assembly declared May 3 to be Freedom of the Press Day in 1993 to memorialise those journalists and to commemorate the basic tenets of press freedom, to examine press independence around the world, to defend the freedom of the media, and to assess press freedom in general. a day set aside to remember people who have died worldwide, their contributions to journalism, and their memory (UNESCO, WPF)

2016). Since then, the day has been devoted to bringing attention to violations of press freedom throughout the world, including the intimidation, detention, and even murder of journalists who are on the job.

A UNESCO Research Conference on the Protection of Journalists was conducted in Helsinki, Finland, in May 2016 to commemorate World Press Freedom Day. The protection of journalists' physical and mental health is one of today's most crucial issues, according to UNESCO, because it directly affects press freedom, information freedom, and sustainable development. Therefore, guaranteeing the safety of journalists both online and offline was one of the three distinct themes and perspectives that evaluated the situation of press freedom globally in 2016. (UNESCO, 2016).

#### Research Methodology:

In addition to secondary research, primary research will be used in this study. As part of the qualitative research approach, in-depth interviews with well-known journalists will be carried out to provide an inside look at the challenges the journalism community faces due to inadequate media coverage of issues pertaining to journalists' safety and impunity.

#### Findings and Analysis:

The findings collected through the respondents provided by media professionals and journalists shows that journalists face several problems ranging from censorship, external influences in reporting and weak regulatory frameworks often used against journalists. Moreover, censorship is a problem which is frequently experienced by journalists especially when the issue is related to national security or the armed forces as any critical report citing the military cannot be published as it can lead to adverse reactions. However, censorship is not only limited to national security but other aspects of the country such as reporting against corrupt practices involving politicians and mafias involved in illegal activities can also become sources of intimidation for journalists.

Since such reports contradict the financial gains from such illicit activities, reporting against such elements may have unfavorable effects. For on-the-

ground reporters who focus on hazardous situations and receive little protection after publishing critical reports, this can be particularly deadly. particularly the reporters who cover security-related topics.

There are several reasons as to why journalists face security issues and the main reason claimed by most respondents was that producing critical reports often lands journalists in life-endangering situations. Moreover, the lack of support provided by employers and senior editors worsens their situation as in most situations employers are adamant about following their editorial and organizational policies which can at times lead to biased reports being published, not complying can lead to forced resignations for the reporters so they are not left with much choice but to follow the guidelines provided employers even though such policies might be leaning towards bias.

Another reason for the lack of support is due to the rise in independent or citizen journalism as there are no editorial controls so independent journalists can freely post and publish their stories, no matter how critical and as a result face immense threats and intimidation. Although citizen journalism has emerged as an alternative platform for independent expression, it continues to face issues related to credibility, safety, and institutional support.

The reason for securities being prolonged is because of lack of awareness by the masses towards journalist's exploitation either through external influences or internal. As it is the responsibility of mainstream media to highlight the problems faced by journalists.

Most of the respondents agreed to the fact that PECA 2016 and similar ordinances were mainly used to silence and censor journalists by implementing charges of defamation whenever a critical report is published against an individual or institution. Since it is not possible that every critical report to be filed under defamation if that report can be factually verified, yet journalists face charges of defamation. Moreover, the respondents claimed that these ordinances were introduced to uphold the standard of journalism so they do not carry out unfair practices like yellow journalism but instead politicians and state officials use these

ordinances as a mechanism to impose censorship upon journalists.

According to the qualitative study, the majority of respondents believed that the PECA 2016 and other laws were frequently used to target journalists in an effort to censor or silence them. whenever they have made critical remarks about various government agencies, since the majority of critical information is considered defamatory. Upholding the right to free speech is the cornerstone of all laws, but freedom must be constrained in order to protect the state.

Most of the respondents were not confident in the future betterment of journalism as they considered mainstream media to be biased towards a particular agenda, policy or political party. So, reporting will be based on the organizational policies of that particular news channel, as a result objectivity will diminish and will pave the way for biased, agenda-centered reporting. Since journalists such as field reporters will be the first to suffer from publishing a critically objective report so due to lack of supports for reporters and other news media professionals will ultimately lead to downfall in the standard of journalism. Some of them claimed that citizen journalism still has the potential to prosper in what will be considered the new-age of journalism as there are fewer editorial controls so authenticity in reportage can be maintained.

#### CONCLUSION:

A challenging environment for journalism characterized by pervasive censorship, external pressures, and inadequate legal protections can be observed. Journalists face significant threats when reporting on sensitive issues, particularly those involving national security, political corruption, and organized crime, with field reporters being especially vulnerable due to limited institutional support from their employers.

Legislative frameworks like PECA 2016, originally designed to maintain journalistic standards, have been used as tools of censorship through defamation charges, effectively silencing critical voices rather than protecting press freedom. This misuse of legal mechanisms creates a chilling effect on investigative journalism and undermines fundamental freedoms of expression.

The quality and integrity of journalism will continue to deteriorate in the absence of comprehensive reforms to bolster protections for journalists and stop regulatory abuse, ultimately jeopardizing the public's access to unbiased information crucial to a democratic society.

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