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Pakistan: Drop Charges Against Outspoken Journalist

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Matiullah Jan Latest Reporter Unjustly Prosecuted Under Draconian Laws

(Bangkok) - An [anti-terrorism court](#) in Islamabad, [Pakistan](#), is scheduled to [indict Matiullah Jan](#), a journalist who has long reported on police abuse, on October 31, 2025, on apparent politically motivated charges, Human Rights Watch said today. The Pakistani authorities should immediately drop the baseless charges against Jan under several sections of the [1997 Anti-Terrorism Act](#) and for narcotics' possession.

Pakistani journalists have in recent years increasingly faced serious obstacles to their work, including harassment, threats, assault, arbitrary arrest and detention, enforced disappearance, and killings. The authorities have increasingly pressured editors and media owners to stifle critical reporting. So far in 2025, the authorities have filed about [689 cases](#) under the draconian and overbroad 2016 Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, often targeting journalists, as well as under the Anti-Terrorism Act. Television channels critical of the government have experienced signal disruptions during broadcasts of opposition rallies.

“The Pakistani authorities’ prosecution of Matiullah Jan appears to be a heavy-handed attempt to silence critical journalism,” said [Patricia Gossman](#), associate Asia director at Human Rights Watch. “The government should drop the charges and stop using the criminal justice system to punish journalists for doing their jobs.”

The [police claim](#) that they stopped Jan at a checkpoint in Islamabad’s E-9 area on [November 27, 2024](#), and that he allegedly possessed 246 grams of methamphetamine and committed acts of terrorism by resisting arrest and escaping. He contends that the authorities are retaliating against him because of his reporting on the police’s excessive use of force against political protesters. The authorities have also accused Jan of spreading “[fake news for dollars](#),” but these allegations do not appear in the criminal charges filed against him.

Jan has denied that the police attempted to arrest him at the checkpoint. He said that instead, on November 27, 2024, after the authorities registered a criminal case against him, unidentified men in black uniforms abducted him and another journalist, Saqib Bashir, from a parking lot, blindfolded them, and forced them into a vehicle. Bashir was released three hours later; the Islamabad High Court [granted Jan bail](#) on November 30.

The authorities have targeted Jan, a [journalist](#) who has covered legal and political issues, for three decades. On July 21, 2020, unidentified assailants [abducted](#) Jan in Islamabad, a day before he was to appear before the Supreme Court to face accusations of “using derogatory/contemptuous language and maligning the institution of the judiciary.” He was released after 12 hours. Jan filed a criminal case against his abductors, but no one was ever arrested.

Domestic and international journalist and civil society organizations including the [Committee to Protect Journalists](#), the [International Federation of Journalists](#), [Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists](#), and the [Human Rights Commission of Pakistan](#) have called on the authorities to drop the charges against Jan.

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which Pakistan ratified in 2010, prohibits restrictions on freedom of expression on national security grounds unless they are provided by law, strictly construed, and necessary and proportionate to address a legitimate threat. Laws that impose criminal penalties for peaceful expression are of particular concern because of the chilling effects they have on free speech.

The United Nations Human Rights Committee, the independent expert body that monitors compliance with the ICCPR, has stated in its [General Comment No. 34](#) on freedom of expression that: “[T]he mere fact that forms of expression are considered to be insulting to a public figure is not sufficient to justify the imposition of penalties.... Moreover, all public figures ... are legitimately subject to criticism and political opposition.”

Pakistani authorities should conduct prompt, impartial, and effective investigations into recent attacks and dubious prosecutions of journalists, Human Rights Watch said. The government should amend or annul laws and rescind official policies that violate the right to freedom of expression and media freedom, and instead promote space for public debate and free expression in the face of threats from extremist groups and government officials.

“The Pakistani government needs to stop harassing and unjustly prosecuting journalists and ensure they can report freely without fear of retaliation,” Gossman said. “The authorities should recognize the value to Pakistani society of those reporting on human rights issues rather than trying to muzzle them.”

Associated documents