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Attacks on the Press 2010: Pakistan

Top Developments

- Suicide bombings take devastating toll on media, killing, injuring dozens.
- Journalists face threats from all sides, notably Taliban and the ISI.

Key Statistic

8: Journalists killed in relation to their work in 2010, the highest figure in the world.

Pakistan was the deadliest nation for the press in 2010 as violence spread well beyond the Afghan border region. Eight journalists and one media support worker were killed in relation to their work and numerous others were injured, many in suicide bomb attacks.

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Pakistani journalists also saw a profound threat from their own government. On September 4, men in commando-style uniforms abducted Umar Cheema, a prominent political reporter for the English-language daily *The News*, in a suburb of Islamabad, holding him for two days as they beat and humiliated him. For journalists, the case was reminiscent of earlier abductions by suspected security agents. Cheema, who directly blamed the powerful Inter-Services Intelligence agency for the attack, said his abductors demanded that he stop writing articles critical of the government. President Asif Ali Zardari pledged the government would investigate, but journalists were deeply skeptical that anyone would be held accountable. In a widely cited editorial in support of Cheema, the English-language daily *Dawn* wrote, "This paper's stand is clear: The government and its intelligence agencies will be considered guilty until they can prove their innocence." In an e-mail to CPJ, Cheema said, "I don't think the government is serious in locating the culprits. Their publicly expressed resolve and the commitments they made were for public consumption, nothing more."

Zardari, who took office in 2008, undermined his own credibility with the press and public. Pakistani media were critical of the government's handling of catastrophic summer flooding but reserved their harshest judgment for the president, who continued a trip to Britain and France even as flood waters rose. In response, the president's Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) organized

demonstrations against Geo and ARY television, two stations that took the lead in the criticism. The stations were forced off the air in Karachi and much of Sindh province for days after PPP activists severed cable connections. PPP supporters also resorted to sometimes-violent demonstrations outside the offices of the stations and their cable distributors. But 82 percent of respondents to a *Dawn* opinion poll faulted the government for an inadequate response to the disaster. The floods, which began with unusually heavy monsoon rains in July, had devastating consequences. By September, the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs said more than 1,700 people had died and 1.8 million homes had been damaged or destroyed. The Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists (PFUJ) said that at least 213 journalists saw their homes washed away in the flood waters. Journalist Asma Anwar lost her life in flooding in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province (the former North West Frontier Province).

Beyond the flood, the government's attitude toward the media occasionally took a turn for the absurd. Journalist organizations in Larkana, Karachi, Lahore, and Islamabad observed a "black day" of protest in reaction to a resolution passed by the Punjab Assembly in Lahore on June 9. The legislature had condemned the media for "promoting antigovernment propaganda" by reporting that some lawmakers had fabricated their university degrees. A few days later, after polls showed that most Pakistanis were as angry about the phony diplomas as the press was, the assembly passed a separate resolution praising the role of the media for "the restoration of democracy in the country."

These sorts of hijinks might be amusing if they were not taking place against a backdrop of mounting terrorist attacks from the Taliban, Taliban-allied organizations, and several regional separatist groups. The attacks were not just along the Afghan border and in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), but in Quetta, Karachi, and Lahore, too. Some Taliban groups, under military pressure in their regular redoubts in FATA, started to turn toward urban areas, where they felt they could hide within the populace and operate with relative impunity. Karachi, in particular, saw an increase in Taliban-driven attacks and violence between Shiite and Sunni groups.

Journalists continued to face severe threats in areas along the border with Afghanistan, where the Pakistani military conducted sporadic operations. In April, a Taliban spokesman said the group was angry about the way it was being portrayed on Pakistani television and issued "a last warning" to numerous Pakistani media outlets. According to translations in Pakistani English-language papers, the message asked: "Why is the media only conveying the army's point of view? Is this proof that the media is also working as an ally for the government and the army? Or they are being forced to hide the truth?" Media coverage of military operations was largely limited to embedded reporters, who were forced to accept severe censorship rules if they wanted to accompany troops during their operations.

Bombings took a heavy toll on the press. On September 3, a suicide bomber detonated explosives during a Shiite demonstration in Quetta, triggering gunfire and other violence. Mohammad Sarwar, a driver for Aaj TV, died in the melee, and Ejaz Raisani, a cameraman for Samaa TV, died of gunshot wounds three days later, news reports said. Eight other journalists were reported injured. The Pakistani Taliban and the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi each claimed responsibility for the bombing, which was just one in a series of recent assaults on Shiite gatherings, local news reports said. Some news reports linked the violence that followed the Quetta bombing to surviving protesters.

Suicide bombings claimed the lives of two Samaa TV journalists on successive days in April. On April 16, cameraman Malik Arif was killed and five other journalists were injured in a bombing at a

hospital in Quetta, news reports said. The next day, a suicide bombing killed correspondent Azamat Ali Bangash as he was covering food distribution in a refugee camp near Orakzai, in FATA.

In February, a bomb blast injured Express News TV reporter Amjad Ali Shah and cameraman Muhammad Imranullah Siddiqui, along with Muhammad Israr, a reporter for the Pashto-language television channel AVT Khyber. They were accompanying a convoy of security forces in the Lower Dir district of northwestern Pakistan. The bomb exploded while federal paramilitary personnel were escorting journalists and U.S. soldiers to the reopening of a girls' school destroyed by the Taliban in 2009, according to local and international media reports. Two days later, a double bombing in Karachi targeting Shiites injured 12 journalists and media workers.

Militants directly targeted a journalist's family in a July attack. Assaults threw grenades and opened fire on a home occupied by the family of Zafarullah Bonari, a correspondent for ARY and Al-Jazeera. At least six women and children were seriously injured, local media reported. The tactic was not new. Sher Khan Afridi, president of the Khyber Union of Journalists, told CPJ that militants had targeted six journalists' homes for destruction in 2009.

Three journalists were targeted for murder. In September, gunmen pumped several shots into Misri Khan, president of the Hangu Union of Journalists, outside the Hangu Press Club in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, according to PFUJ. Hangu, a volatile town near the border with Afghanistan, has long been the site of unrest between militant groups in the area. In May, Ghulam Rasool Birhamani's body was found outside the village of Wahi Pandhi in Sindh province, a day after he was reported kidnapped. PFUJ and the media support group Pakistan Press Foundation said his body was badly scarred and showed evidence of torture. Birhamani, 30, was a reporter for the Sindhi-language daily *Sindhu Hyderabad*. And in February, local and international media reported that Ashiq Ali Mangi was fatally shot while on his way to a press club in the town of Gambat, north of Karachi. PFUJ said that Mangi, a reporter for the private television channel Mehran TV, may have been targeted because of his coverage of a feud between two ethnic groups.

For Pakistan's burgeoning broadcast media, surging violence posed questions of ethics and professionalism. By early 2010, eight leading television channels had adopted a voluntary system of editorial restraint in live coverage of terrorist attacks, hostage situations, and similar violent events. The channels agreed to avoid graphic images of the dead and injured, discourage speculative reporting, and implement delay mechanisms in hostage situations. The voluntary guidelines were seen as fending off the government's recurring attempts to regulate coverage.

With a low literacy rate and relatively poor landline systems, Internet penetration in Pakistan remained low. The International Telecommunication Union estimated there to be nearly 19 million Internet users as of June 2009, a penetration of about 10.6 percent. But digital mobile devices using the country's well-established cellular phone system were increasingly common. Such digital platforms will most likely come under much closer scrutiny in the coming years.

In May, Pakistani authorities blocked domestic access to Facebook for about two weeks after a campaign on the social networking site had solicited caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad, news reports said. The next month, Facebook and Twitter users in Pakistan reported a strange set of problems: They found themselves already logged in when they visited the sites--but with the accounts and privileges of complete strangers. They could also read private Facebook information and Twitter messages belonging to other users. Internet analysts speculated that the problems arose

when the government-owned Pakistan Telecommunication Company tested the use of proxies as a local censorship system.

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