

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	725
Land:	Pakistan
Kilde:	Reporters Without Borders
Titel:	Alarming signs for press freedom under Pakistan's new authorities
Udgivet:	7. juni 2024
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	21. oktober 2024



Document #2110547

RSF – Reporters Sans Frontières (Author)

Alarming signs for press freedom under Pakistan's new authorities

Reporters Without Borders (RSF) urges Pakistan's new federal and provincial authorities to adopt urgent measures to address the signs of an alarming deterioration in press freedom since they took office three months ago.

What with murders of journalists, an enforced disappearance, arbitrary detention, censorship and social media blocking, everything points to a very disturbing decline in press freedom in the first three months since the new federal and provincial governments took over at the start of March following elections in February.

"The many press freedom violations reveal a climate of violence and a determination to censor that has little in common with the undertakings given by the political parties in their elections campaign manifestos, and the message of support for journalists by Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif. The strategy of suppressing critical voices is becoming ever more visible, amid claims that the results of the election were tainted by fraud and continuing army interference in politics. Pakistan remains one of the world's most dangerous countries for media personnel, and the level of impunity for murders of journalists is appalling. RSF reiterates its call to Pakistan's new leaders at the national and provincial level to adopt urgent measures to restore press freedom.

Célia Mercier
Head of RSF's South Asia desk

- Murders of journalists

Kamran Dawar, a freelance journalist in the northwestern district of North Waziristan who ran a YouTube [channel](#) and a Facebook TV news channel called [Waziristan TV](#), was murdered on 21 May, just weeks after telling colleagues he feared for his safety.

[Nasrullah Gadani](#), a reporter for the *Awami Awaz* newspaper in the southern province of Sindh who criticised the feudal system in his region, was riddled with bullets by gunmen on a motorcycle the same day, and died of his injuries three days later.

- **Abduction by intelligence agents**

Ali Ahmed Farhad Shah, a freelance journalist and poet who is very critical of the army and who comes from Azad Kashmir, the Pakistani part of the northeastern Jammu and Kashmir region, was abducted from his home in the capital, Islamabad, on 15 May. After his wife filed a legal petition, the Azad Kashmir police finally revealed that they were holding Shah because he had shared “provocative material” on Facebook during protests in the region – in which he did not participate because he was in Islamabad. An anti-terrorism court in Muzaffarabad, Azad Kashmir’s capital, rejected a request for his release on bail on 4 June.

- **Arbitrary detentions, press clubs harassed**

Sher Afgan, a journalist with the *Bol News* TV channel who is the president of the press club in Dera Ghazi Khan, a city in Punjab province, and **Ghulam Mustafa**, a reporter for the *Daily Ausaf* newspaper and president of the Anjuman-e-Sahafyan (Union of Journalists), were detained on 7 May for objecting to a police raid on the press club during a press conference by supporters of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), the party of imprisoned former Prime Minister Imran Khan.

On 18 May, police surrounded the press club in Quetta, the capital of the southwestern province of Balochistan, to prevent a Baloch group from holding a press conference about enforced disappearances.

- **Trumped-up charges against journalists forced to flee abroad**

An absurd case against two journalists who have had to flee to the United States was [revived](#) by an anti-terrorism court in Islamabad at the end of May. The two journalists – [YouTuber](#) **Wajahat Saeed Khan** and **Shaheen Sehbai**, the former editor of *The News International* newspaper – have been subjected to [trumped-up charges](#) of conspiring to “weaken the army” and “increase terrorism” since June 2023.

- **New censorship measures**

On 3 May, the federal government announced the [creation](#) of a National Cyber Crimes Investigation Agency (NCCIA) to monitor online content.

The controversial [Punjab Defamation Act](#) of 2024 was passed by the Punjab provincial government on 20 May. Under this new law, proof of harm is not needed to bring defamation actions, impose fines on media and journalists, and block their accounts.

On 21 May, the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) [banned](#) TV news channels from broadcasting information about “ongoing court cases” until a final verdict is announced. Nonetheless, in response to petitions by a journalists’ organisation, the Islamabad High Court and High Court of Sindh said in [rulings](#) issued in early June that journalists were free to cover court cases.

- **X blocked since February**

Access to the social media platform X (the former Twitter) has been intermittently blocked on “[national security](#)” grounds since the general elections in early February. The aim has been to [stifle](#) any protests since the elections, which were marked by allegations of fraud.

ecoi.net description:

Article on the rise in press freedom violations since the new federal and provincial governments took office in early March 2024

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ecoi.net is run by the Austrian Red Cross (department ACCORD) in cooperation with Informationsverbund Asyl & Migration. ecoi.net is funded by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, the Austrian Ministry of the Interior and Caritas Austria. ecoi.net is supported by ECRE & UNHCR.

Country:

Pakistan

Source:



RSF – Reporters Sans Frontières



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Published:

7 June 2024



Original link:

<https://rsf.org/en/alarming-signs-press-freedom-under-pakistan-s-new-authorities>

Document type:

Appeal or News Release

Language:

English

Available on ecoi.net since:

12 June 2024

Document ID:

2110547