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Press Freedom Status: Not Free

Total Score: 65/100 (↓1) (0 = Most Free, 100 = Least Free)

Legal Environment: 19/30

Political Environment: 30/40 (↓1)

Economic Environment: 16/30

Quick Facts

Population: 203,400,000

Freedom in the World Status: Partly Free

Net Freedom Status: Not Free

Internet Penetration Rate: 18.0%

Key Developments in 2016:

- The Prevention of Electronic Crimes Bill (PECB) became law in September. It contains vague language that could give authorities broad powers to censor online content and prosecute online speech.
- The country's powerful military pressured media outlets and journalists to disseminate positive coverage of its operations against militant Islamist groups.
- Three journalists were killed during the year, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ). In October, the organization reported that 21 murders of journalists since 2006 remained unsolved.

Executive Summary

Restrictive laws including ones penalizing defamation and blasphemy; threats directed at journalists from a variety of actors, including the military and intelligence agencies and militant groups; and the threat of violence contribute to a hostile operating environment for Pakistan's journalists.

The controversial PECB became law in September. Its provisions contain vague language that could permit authorities broad powers to censor online content in the name of preserving national

security. The law also provides for as long as three years' imprisonment for disseminating information with "dishonest" intent or which is deemed to harm an individual's reputation.

Pakistan's journalists, who already face severe obstacles in covering activities of the armed forces, in 2016 came under acute pressure to disseminate positive coverage of military operations, with some sources reporting that the military figures issue explicit directives for coverage.

While the rate of media workers' killings has declined somewhat in recent years, Pakistan remains among the most dangerous places in the world to practice journalism. In 2016, two journalists were killed in a Quetta bombing in August, and another was shot and killed in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province in January. Impunity remains the norm for attacks against journalists.

Legal Environment: 19 / 30

The constitution and other legislation, such as the Official Secrets Act, authorize the government to curb freedom of speech on subjects including the constitution itself, the armed forces, the judiciary, and religion. Broadly defined contempt laws have been employed by the judiciary to restrict reporting on particular cases or judges. Journalists can face prosecution under a variety of antiterrorism measures. The 2014 Protection of Pakistan Act gives security forces expansive powers to search, detain, and use force against suspects. It also includes vague references to "internet offenses and other offenses related to information technology" – provisions that have raised concerns that the law could be used against journalists. The controversial PECB became law in September 2016. The measure has been criticized for containing vague language that could permit authorities broad powers to censor online content in order to preserve national security. The law also provides for as long as three years' imprisonment for disseminating information with "dishonest" intent, or which is deemed to harm an individual's reputation.

Separately, after the daily *Dawn* published an October 2016 story detailing a clash in which civilian officials had demanded that the military take greater action against militant activity in the country, a government commission was formed to investigate the source of the story. The Press Council of Pakistan (PCP), the state print regulator, the following month resolved that the committee's mission was inappropriate and should not move forward. Meanwhile, the report's author was added to a list of people prohibited from leaving the country.

Defamation is a criminal offense punishable by fines and up to two years in prison, though in most instances defamation claims do not result in any fine or action. Blasphemy laws have been used against journalists.

Separately, in 2015, a court in Lahore ordered Pakistan's broadcast and print regulatory bodies – the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) and the PCP, respectively – to institute a ban on coverage of Altaf Hussain, head of the secular Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM); the order came in response to several petitions alleging that he had defamed state institutions, including the armed forces, in various speeches. In February 2016, PEMRA issued a warning against the private ARY News channel for what it described as irresponsible reporting on the army.

Accessing official information remains difficult, and existing provisions for obtaining public records are generally ineffective. However, positive developments have been seen at the provincial levels, notably in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, which each passed generally progressive freedom of information legislation in 2013 that has since seen some use. A draft of a national-level freedom of information law, produced by a senate committee, has won praise from transparency advocates but had not been approved at the end of 2016.

The broadcast media must register through PEMRA, whose members are appointed or approved by the government. In 2015, a renowned investigative journalist was appointed as PEMRA's chair. Nevertheless, the agency has a record of issuing politicized suspensions and fines, and in late 2016, it suspended and fined two television channels in response to critical coverage of the judiciary, and issued a fine, but not a suspension, against a third on the same basis.

Print media can operate on the basis of a declaration. The PCP is tasked with hearing complaints against print media and promoting journalistic ethics, but is generally ineffective.

A number of media advocacy organizations including those that focus on online freedoms operate in the country, but divisions between the various groups hamper their ability to advocate collectively.

The authorities are believed to engage in online surveillance, and the communications of some journalists have reportedly been monitored. Such practices encourage self-censorship and deter contacts between journalists and their sources.

Political Environment: 30 / 40 (↓1)

Many journalists are expected to follow editorial lines set by their media houses. Political actors, government officials, and military and intelligence officers regularly complain about critical reporting, and some have attempted to exert control over media content through unofficial "guidance" to newspaper editors on placement of front-page stories and permissible topics of coverage. Armed groups, political parties, and state institutions have coerced news outlets into publishing denunciations of their opponents.

In 2016, the media came under acute pressure from the military to produce positive coverage of its Zarb-e-Azb operation against militant Islamist groups operating in regions near the Afghan border, with reports of military directives for coverage being issued to journalists and outlets. Meanwhile, the military's media wing disseminated coverage that was critical of the country's civilian leaders, in an apparent attempt to promote the military as the most responsible steward of the country. Such pressure has contributed to self-censorship, as well as a decrease in the diversity of viewpoints available in Pakistani media with regard to military operations.

Media access to certain parts of the country remains restricted, either by special government regulations or a high threat of violence. Conditions for reporters covering the ongoing civil conflict and military offensive in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and some districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province remain difficult, with journalists at risk of detention, threats, expulsion, abduction, attacks, and other interference by actors including Taliban militants and local tribal groups, criminal organizations, and the army and intelligence services. Journalists' ability to cover military operations in the FATA is limited, as they can gain official access only if they agree to become embedded with military units, which means that any reporting is subject to potential censorship. Media in general remain much more tightly restricted in the FATA and Balochistan than elsewhere in Pakistan.

Websites and blogs addressing sensitive subjects are routinely blocked, and the government has increased censorship of allegedly blasphemous material in recent years. Access to the video-sharing website YouTube was restored in January 2016, after being blocked for several years. However, residents of Pakistan have access to a local version of YouTube, which allows Pakistani authorities to remove content deemed offensive.

Fear of reprisals has caused some journalists to self-censor, particularly on military or intelligence operations, sensitive social or religious issues, and certain militant groups and political parties.

While Pakistan remains among the most dangerous places in the world for journalists to operate, the number of killings has declined somewhat over the last five years, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ). According to CPJ, three journalists were killed in Pakistan in 2016. Two – cameraman Shehzad Ahmed and cameraman Mehmood Khan – died in a bombing attack in Quetta in August. In January, Muhammad Umar, a correspondent with the private *Daily Dera News* was shot and killed in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province; CPJ was investigating whether the killing was related to his work as a journalist. Impunity remains the norm for most journalists' killings. In October 2016, CPJ reported that 21 murders of journalists that were committed between September 1, 2006, and August 31, 2016, remained unsolved.

Economic Environment: 16 / 30

Pakistan is home to hundreds of daily, weekly, and monthly news publications that publish in English, Urdu, and a number of regional languages. Several dozen all-news cable and satellite television channels – some of which broadcast from outside the country – provide live domestic news coverage, commentary, and call-in talk shows, informing viewers and shaping public opinion on current events. However, the government continues to control Pakistan Television and Radio Pakistan, the only free-to-air terrestrial broadcast outlets with national reach; the staff receives directives from the Information Ministry, and their coverage supports official viewpoints.

Private radio stations operate in some major cities but are restricted in how they carry news programming, and PEMRA imposes a maximum broadcast radius of 50 kilometers (30 miles) on private FM transmitters. In some rural regions such as the FATA, illegal extremist radio is prominent, with radical Islamists broadcasting unchallenged propaganda. International television and radio broadcasts are usually available in Pakistan, with the exception of news channels based in India. About 16 percent of people in Pakistan accessed the internet in 2016, according to the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), with an increasing number of people accessing the internet on smart phones. Blogs and social media are growing in popularity, and many traditional news outlets provide content over the internet.

Cable television operators occasionally pressure media outlets to censor stories that could conflict with their business interests, or suspend the transmission of certain channels in response to threats.

There are few restrictions on news production and distribution, but there are high costs associated with the establishment and operation of broadcast media operations.

Provincial and national authorities have used advertising boycotts and bribes to put economic pressure on media outlets or provide incentives to keep journalists in check. Both state and private interests, including the powerful intelligence agencies, reportedly pay for favorable press coverage, a practice that is exacerbated by the low salaries of many journalists.

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