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Freedom of the Press 2011 - Pakistan

Status: Not Free**Legal Environment:** 18**Political Environment:** 27**Economic Environment:** 16**Total Score:** 61

Media freedoms in 2010 were hampered by attempts from certain key officials – particularly military and intelligence officials, as well as the higher judiciary – to silence critical reporting, and also by the high level of violence against journalists. The constitution and other legislation, such as the Official Secrets Act, authorize the government to curb freedom of speech on subjects including the constitution, the armed forces, the judiciary, and religion. Harsh blasphemy laws have occasionally been used to suppress the media. Under the 2004 Defamation Act, offenders can face minimum fines of 100,000 rupees (\$1,700) and prison sentences of up to five years; however, this legislation has not yet been used to convict journalists. In 2010, broadly defined contempt laws were increasingly used by the judiciary to curb reporting on particular cases or judges, with a number of print and television outlets threatened with judicial contempt charges during the year.

Broadcast media are regulated by the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA), which has occasionally used its power to halt broadcasts and shut media offices. Ordinances issued in late 2007 as part of the imposition of martial law that placed additional restrictions on both print and broadcast media – which had been routinely flouted under civilian rule – were formally nullified in April 2010 as part of parliament's passage of the 18th Amendment. However, other PEMRA regulations, including a code of conduct and the 2009 PEMRA Rules, remain in force, and the government continued to engage in sporadic efforts to temporarily suspend certain broadcasts and programs. Recent proposals emanating from both the National Assembly and the Senate would introduce legislation restricting live coverage of violence or terrorist attacks. The proposals also contained broadly worded clauses that would ban broadcasts of any content considered "defamatory against the organs of the state." The bills had not been approved at the year's end. In November 2009, eight prominent broadcast media houses banded together to draft a voluntary code of conduct for depictions of violence, which was implemented in 2010 in an effort to imbue the rapidly growing sector with added professionalism and to stave off onerous official regulations.

Political actors, government officials, and military and intelligence officers allegedly continued to complain about critical coverage, and some attempted to exert control over media content through unofficial "guidance" to newspaper editors on placement of front-page stories and permissible topics of coverage. Fear of reprisals caused some journalists to refrain from being overly critical or to overstep unspoken boundaries, particularly concerning military or intelligence operations. Self-censorship also occurs with regard to coverage of sensitive social or religious issues, as well as certain militant groups and political parties.

The physical safety of journalists remains a key concern. Intimidation by intelligence agencies and the security forces – including physical attacks and arbitrary, incommunicado detention – continue to take place. Umar Cheema, an investigative reporter, was abducted by unknown men and subjected to intimidation and abuse for six hours in September, ostensibly in retaliation for articles he had written that criticized the government and military. In addition, Islamic fundamentalists, mercenaries hired by feudal landlords or local politicians, party activists, security forces, and police have been known to harass journalists and attack media offices. Lawyers attacked journalists attempting to cover judicial issues and the ongoing lawyers' protests on a number of occasions as well. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, at least eight journalists were killed while performing their work in 2010, making

Pakistan the world's deadliest country for members of the press. While some of these reporters were deliberately targeted, others were killed or injured as they attempted to cover unfolding political events or military operations, or were among the victims of large-scale suicide bombings. Impunity is the norm for such crimes, with many murder cases from previous years remaining unsolved.

Conditions for reporters covering the ongoing conflict in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (formerly the North West Frontier Province) remain difficult, as a number of correspondents were detained, threatened, expelled, kidnapped, or otherwise prevented from working, either by the Taliban and local tribal groups or by the army and intelligence services. Journalists' ability to cover military operations in these areas is hampered because they can gain access only if they agree to become "embedded" with military units, which leads to any reporting being subject to potential censorship. A number of journalists in the Balochistan province were also targeted for their work during the year, including Abdul Hameed Hayatan, who was kidnapped in October and found dead a month later. Media remain much more tightly restricted in the FATA than elsewhere in Pakistan. Independent radio is allowed only with permission from the FATA secretariat, and no newspapers are published there. In Pakistani-administered Kashmir, publications need special permission from the regional government to operate, and proindependence publications are generally prohibited. Coverage of the restive Balochistan province remains difficult, with reporters facing pressure and harassment from both Balochi nationalists and the government.

A wide range of privately owned daily and weekly newspapers and magazines provide diverse and critical coverage of national affairs. The government continues to control Pakistan Television and Radio Pakistan, the only free-to-air broadcast outlets with a national reach; their staff receive directives from the Information Ministry and their coverage supports official viewpoints. Private radio stations operate in some major cities but are prohibited from broadcasting news programming. However, in a dramatic opening of the media landscape in recent years, several dozen private all-news cable and satellite television channels – such as GEO, ARY, Aaj, and Dawn, some of which broadcast from outside the country – have arisen to provide live domestic news coverage, commentary, and call-in talk shows, informing viewers and shaping public opinion on current events. International television and radio broadcasts are usually available, with the exception of news channels based in India. In April 2010, PEMRA directed a number of FM radio stations to stop carrying British Broadcasting Corporation news programs, claiming that the stations did not have the required licenses to do so. Provincial and national authorities have used advertising or other types of boycotts to put economic pressure on media outlets that do not heed unofficial directives. In October 2010, the ruling Pakistan People's Party (PPP) announced a boycott of the Jang Group, owner of the Geo television station and a number of newspapers, known for its increasingly antigovernment editorial line. Earlier in the year, Geo and ARY transmissions had been blocked, and PPP activists attacked cable operators' premises and destroyed copies of newspapers, after the channels had reported critically on President Asif Ali Zardari's handling of the August flooding crisis. In January 2010, the Jang Group filed a legal complaint alleging that the ban on official advertisements in its outlets was illegal. Both state and private interests – including the powerful intelligence agencies – reportedly pay for favorable press coverage, a practice exacerbated by the low salary levels of many journalists.

The internet is not widely used, with almost 17 percent of the population accessing the medium in 2010. However, blogs are growing in popularity and many traditional news outlets provide content over the internet. The Prevention of Electronic Crimes Ordinance, issued in November 2008, criminalized cyberterrorism – which was broadly defined as using or accessing a computer, network, or electronic device for the purposes of frightening, harming, or carrying out an act of violence against any segment of the population or the government – and provided for harsh penalties in cases resulting in a death. The e-mail accounts of some journalists are reportedly monitored. Access to some websites is periodically blocked, particularly those involving Balochi nationalist issues or other sensitive subjects. In 2010, the government moved to block "blasphemous" internet content on Facebook and other social networking sites, as well as on search engines or other content providers such as YouTube and Wikipedia – leading to a blanket shutdown of several websites in May, as well as approximately 12,000 specific URLs. However, the government refrained from cracking down on inflammatory content posted by Islamist groups.

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