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## Pakistan: A year of media suppression and rights abuses

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"Sneaky", "sinister" and "Orwellian" are just some of the words Pakistani journalists and human rights defenders used to describe the censorship and growing clampdown on dissent, mainstream and social media ([https://www.aljazeera.com/topics/categories/human\\_rights.html](https://www.aljazeera.com/topics/categories/human_rights.html)) in their country over the past year.

Although previous Pakistani governments also put pressure on civil society and the media, this year, many Pakistanis working in these fields I talked to felt that direct and indirect repression has increased significantly.

### **Attacks on the media**

As we were wrapping up 2018, there were a number of incidents that solidified the perception that the situation in the country has really gotten worse.

In early December, the Pakistani authorities blocked the website of Voice of America's Pashto language radio service.

Then on December 8, a police case was filed against dozens of people in the aftermath of a rally organised by the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (Pashtun Protection Movement - PTM), which campaigns for Pashtun rights. Among them were two journalists Sailaab Mehsud, affiliated with Dawn newspaper and Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty's Mashaal Radio, and Zafar Wazir of the local channel Khyber TV, who had been covering the rally.

On December 14, Pakistan's electronic media regulatory authority (PEMRA) issued an advisory note calling on media outlets not to report (<https://twitter.com/reportpemra/status/1073547206144212994>) excessively on topics such as violence, kidnapping, sexual abuse, terrorism and natural disasters.

This document came after a similar one was issued in advance of the July parliamentary elections, which called (<https://twitter.com/reportpemra/status/1017384431173107714/photo/1>) on the media not to air "derogatory and malicious content" against the judiciary and the army. These regulatory letters purportedly aim to build a "positive image" of the country and address the "negative perception" of Pakistan globally, but many see them as a form of pressure on the media.

Then on December 15, Jang Group, the country's leading media house, fired hundreds of staffers en masse, closing down a number of its outlets.

Over the past year, a number of media organisations have had to downsize or close down due to declining advertising revenue or other financial constraints. Journalists I have talked to believe that this is a tactic to control the media and impose more "friendly" reporting on the authorities.

They also say that printing presses have been pressured to stop from publishing certain newspapers, cable operators have been asked to cease broadcasting certain channels and big businesses have been advised against putting up advertisements with certain media outlets.

The media have also been pressured to fire certain employees who have been too critical of the Pakistani establishment. This year, leading prime-time news show hosts Talat Hussain (<https://twitter.com/talathussain12/status/1018170773641539585?lang=en>), Murtaza Solangi, Mateeullah Jan (<https://www.urduvoa.com/a/4618713.html>), and Nusrat Javed either quit or lost their jobs. What they have in common is that they all questioned the transparency of the July elections and openly criticised the jailing of the former PM Nawaz Sharif and his daughter Mariam Nawaz.

Journalists I talked to also shared their frustration with the increasing pressure and censorship in Pakistani newsrooms.

"It was ridiculous how we had to keep beeping off Nawaz Sharif when he would appear in court and during the election coverage. Election day was one of the worst days in my career as a producer in the newsroom, and I have seen the Musharraf era. We were not allowed to counter the official narrative of the authorities," a senior producer of a news bulletin of a prominent cable news network told me.

An editor of an English-language daily complained that a "screening process" was set up in his newsroom under the explicit directions of the publisher which resulted in everyday interference and forced removal of editorials and op-eds.

## **Pressure on civil society**

In addition to an intensifying clampdown on the media and the resulting self-censorship, the authorities are now pushing hard to further suppress the civic space and impose the official narrative on the human rights situation in the country after the July election.

In 2018, the authorities escalated pressure on human rights defenders and activists peacefully exercising their right to freedom of expression. They faced arrests, disappearances, accusations of treason, and violent threats from hardliner groups. The government has also stepped up filing complaints with social media companies against its online critics.

Recently, Minister of Information Fawad Chaudhry admitted (<https://www.dawn.com/news/1447003>) that the authorities want to regulate social media. Over the past several months, a number of human rights defenders and activists have received emails from Twitter that their tweets violate the country's law; some accounts have even been suspended.

There have also been a number of human rights defenders, journalists and members of the legal profession who have either had to go into hiding or move to another country. Journalist Taha Siddiqui, for example, had to leave with his immediate family after narrowly escaping an abduction attempt (<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/01/journalist-taha-siddiqui-escapes-abduction-attempt-180110114031762.html>).

The current government also continued the campaign the previous one started against non-governmental organisations (NGOs). As a result, this year some 18 international NGOs were forced to discontinue operations in the country, including Action Aid and Plan International.

Another prominent target of the Pakistani authorities' assault on civil society this year was the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement.

Many of its members, including two MPs, Mohsin Dawar and Ali Wazir, are facing police cases for taking part in rallies and corner meetings of the PTM.

In July, Hayat Preghal, a Pashtun human rights defender, was detained for a few days. He later faced charges of "anti-state" online expression via social media (<https://www.aljazeera.com/topics/subjects/social-media.html>) for his posts in support of PTM.

Preghal, who worked as a pharmacist in the United Arab Emirates, was in Pakistan (<https://www.aljazeera.com/topics/country/pakistan.html>) on leave. Following the court hearing, his name was put on a no-fly list and as a result, Preghal, who is the primary breadwinner of his family, lost his job. He is yet another victim of what appears to be a campaign of targeted economic pressure against political dissidents and human rights activists.

Over the summer, Wrranga Lunri, a Pashtun women's rights advocate and supporter of PTM, also faced an intimidation campaign and had to relocate from her hometown in Balochistan. She was targeted for being a woman and an organiser, speaking out in public about her cause.

These are just a few of many examples of people who have fallen victim to the increasing intolerance for freedom of speech and human rights activism in Pakistan.

It is clear that this year the Pakistani authorities not only failed to abide by their constitutional and international commitments to ensure respect for rights and freedoms, but they actually actively engaged in campaigns of intimidation and censorship.

Unfortunately, there is little evidence that 2019 would be any different in this regard.

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