



THE INVESTIGATIVE JOURNAL

— TRUTH IN JOURNALISM —

**THE
SYSTEMATIC
SILENCING
OF PAKISTANI
JOURNALISTS**

Taha Siddiqui

— **2019**

Introduction



The military has been censoring journalists throughout the 71 years of Pakistan's existence... since they have a business empire, they have a direct economic influence on the media industry, which has today resulted in a systematic censorship"

Every afternoon, Matiullah Jan, a prominent Pakistani journalist, would get ready to head to his news bureau in the capital city of Islamabad for the recording of the *Apna Apna Gareban* television show he had hosted for over five years. But now he no longer has such a routine, as he was recently fired from his job. The management of the WAQT TV network he was employed with told him it was due to a financial crisis the organization was facing, but he disagrees, pointing to the Pakistani military's concerted efforts to close his show.

"The military arm-twisted my news organization's management," Mr. Jan explains. "It created the financial crunch in the media. And it also asked advertisers to stop giving ads to my show while maligning me as an anti-state and anti-army journalist [according to my management]. Elements in the military have been involved in censoring journalists throughout the 71 years of Pakistan's existence, and since they have a business empire, they have direct and indirect economic influence on the media industry, which has today resulted in a systematic censorship in the country," he adds. To put this in perspective, Jan has been a journalist for almost 30 years.

Jan is not the only Pakistani journalist to face the axe. Other senior figures such as Talat Hussain, Nusrat Javeed, Murtaza Solangi and many other prominent journalists have also been laid off. The managements of most of these organizations have publicly cited lack of funds as the reason for the layoffs, but a majority of these funds are in lieu of advertising revenues that have not been paid, or have been held back by big corporate advertisers, including the new Pakistani government, which came into power in July 2018. The new government, led by cricketer-turned-politician Imran Khan, has promised to clear the dues, but little progress has been made in this regard so far. The result is that it is pushing many news organizations to take drastic measures, even shutting down television channels such as Jan's, which could not survive after his firing.

Pakistani Journalists Face Arrest, Job Loss and Worse

According to independent estimates, in less than six months, more than 1,000 journalists in Pakistan have lost their jobs due to this artificially created financial crunch in organizations deemed to be critical of the government and the Pakistani military



ENDANGERED SPECIES: Journalists Matulliah Jan, left, with the damage to his car, center, and job loser Nusrat Javeed, right

Since losing his job, Jan says he now spends more time with his family, which is somewhat of a blessing, given he was always too busy with work before. His family has been quite supportive of him in these trying times. “My family and children were not surprised, as they fully understand the price one has to pay for speaking the truth. We all know my show was closed down due to my frank opinions, discussions and questions about topics that are considered by some as a no-go area,” he adds.

Jan also suffered attacks last year when motorcyclists threw a large, brick-size rock onto his front car window while he was driving with his children in Islamabad. Fortunately, he kept the car in control and avoided an accident that could have proved fatal to him and his young ones. He filed a case with the police, who have yet to trace any of his attackers.

Yet Jan is not the only outspoken Pakistani journalist to have faced such an attack. Ahmad Noorani, a journalist who works for The News International, one of the leading news organizations in Pakistan, and who is known to be critical of the Pakistan Army, was attacked at an intersection on a busy road. He was beaten up with iron rods by six unrecognized men and left for dead. As

soon as his attackers fled, he was taken to the hospital, where he was given emergency treatment. He survived only because he was able to get immediate medical help. Since then, none of the attackers has been caught.

Other journalists have faced similar incidents, including myself. After I had been reporting on the situation in Pakistan in various articles for *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *The News International*, *France 24*, *Christian Science Monitor* and other international news organizations, I was abducted on January 10, 2018 by around a dozen armed men while I was in a taxi on my way to the airport for a flight to London for a work trip. The taxi I was traveling in was forcibly stopped on Islamabad Highway in the middle of the road, as two vehicles blocked its way from the front and the back, after which gun-wielding men came out of the vehicles and pulled me out of the taxi before they started beating me up. In a few minutes, they took over the taxi and made me sit in the back of it.

As they were taking me away, I noticed that one of the side doors was unlocked, so I grabbed the opportunity to jump out of the car. I got out and ran to the other side of the road, jumped over the divider between the highway

SURVIVOR: Author Taha Siddiqui, photographed in bloodied shirt immediately following his attack. Others have not been so lucky



and continued running, managing to escape my abductors. I eventually reached a nearby police station, where I filed a police case naming the Pakistan Army and the government agencies as suspects. This was because I had received threats from them for many years and was aware of their determination to attack me following previous incidents.

For example, in 2017, the Federal Investigation Authority — one of Pakistan's top investigation agencies — issued arrest warrants for me under counterterrorism and cybercrime charges, supposedly for maligning the Pakistani military. I was never formally arrested because I had approached the courts, which told the authorities to act in accordance to law and not to harass me, as I was just doing my journalistic duties.

However, a few months later, they came for me again — but fortunately, I also survived that kidnapping (and possible assassination) attempt. As has been the case with many other journalists, the police have supposedly not been able to ascertain the attackers in either case, even though the area where the attack happened was covered with surveillance cameras installed by the government.

I was told that the cameras were not functioning at the time of the incident as their wires were cut.

Later, the then-interior minister of Pakistan, Ahsan Iqbal, invited me to meet him to discuss the case. He advised me to write a letter of apology to Pakistan Army chief General Qamar Bajwa if I wanted to stay safe. After seeing the helplessness of the civilian government, I felt I had no choice but to flee the country. So, I packed my bags, wrapped up my life in Islamabad, and moved to Paris, France, where I currently live, along with my wife and five-year-old son.

It was a difficult choice to leave everything behind, given that I had a good career, and we as family had enjoyed a comfortable home with a strong network of friends and family. My wife's father had just passed away around a month before the attack, and she had been planning to spend more time with her mother since she was alone, but now my wife had to separate from her mother, without knowing when we would return and be able to see her. She also had ongoing photo projects with the international aid agencies that she had to give up. While my wife and



“It was a difficult choice to leave my country. Seeing my child go through such a painful experience was heartbreaking, but considering I was lucky enough to have escaped once, I knew the attackers would not give me another chance to escape, and would possibly just kill me on the spot”

I understood relocation was the best option for us, but it was not so easy to explain the situation to my son. At first, we did not tell him the real reason for this sudden change; we just told him it would mean a better job opportunity for me abroad. Yet when he found out he would have to change schools and leave his friends behind, he broke down and cried for a very long time. When he finally settled down, he only asked if we could bring his toys along, which we agreed

to do. Seeing my child go through such a painful experience was the most heartbreaking moment for me, but considering I was lucky enough to have escaped once, I knew that the next time the attackers came, they would not give me another chance to escape, and would possibly just kill me on the spot — therefore I knew it was best for all of us to resettle abroad until it could be safe enough for me to return.

Yet even now that I am outside of the country, I am still harassed with threats. Recently, I was told by a Western law-enforcement agency there was credible threat against me if I ever return to my country. I was not given any other details, but I was advised to stay away from the Pakistani embassy and any Pakistan-friendly countries, as they will not be safe for me. While I have been lucky enough to get out the country safely, other journalists have not been. According to Freedom Network, an independent media-monitoring body, 26 journalists have been killed in Pakistan in just five years, and more than 100 have been murdered in the past decade and a half. Not one of these cases has received a thorough investigation with due punishment for the perpetrators.

When No News is Bad News: The Beginnings of State Hate for the Media

The common thing among those targeted journalists — both those who were killed, and those who continue to live under constant threats — is that they dared to report topics that are considered taboo by the state (particularly, the Pakistan Army) and sometimes by non-state actors



MICROMANAGER: General Asif Ghafoor (from his own Facebook page)

movements etc. — are now seen by the security establishment as a direct attack on them. And it's not just journalists from the mainstream media who experience this censure, as other online information practitioners are also finding the list of topics they can't have frank or open opinions on is growing."

At a press conference recently, Pakistan's current military media spokesperson, General Asif Ghafoor, who is known to be micromanaging the Pakistani press, urged the country's media to report only positive news. As he explained, this is because Pakistan is going through a "crisis." But Pakistan's so-called "crisis" appears to be self-created, existing predominantly because of the military's interference in the country's affairs.

Even though Pakistan is a democracy on paper, few agree it is in practice. As Mr. Rehmat says: "Pakistan is a democracy by declaration, but not by practice. Article 19 of its constitution 'guaranteeing' freedom of the press in the same article also defines limits on it, forbidding criticism of the military, judiciary, Islam and even foreign countries declared 'friends' by the State. This contradictory constitutional guarantee has resulted in a perpetual paradox."

But even this democratic rule in the country, which is only on paper, is just a decade old. Until

Alarming, the current trend is for an ever-increasing list of taboo topics. With this escalation of contentious topics, journalists no longer know which red lines they should not cross. Owing to this environment of fear, many journalists resort to self-censorship as a means of survival, only reporting on issues that will not irk the authorities in any way.

Explains Adnan Rehmat, a media rights activist in Islamabad, "The principle taboos emanate from the historic Pakistan experience

of being either directly ruled or indirectly influenced by the country's military. The military very early on in Pakistan's history forged a template of loyalty — religious nationalism — requiring the citizens to hate India by default (a foreign policy imperative) and love Islam by constitutional decree (a governance imperative).

"Not only is direct criticism of the military not tolerated, increasingly, any or all of its policies — such as the death penalty, military courts, discouragement of civil rights

2008, Pakistan was ruled by General Pervez Musharraf for nine years. But 11 years ago, the political opposition, combined with a lawyers' movement and the Pakistani press, rallied against the dictatorship.

That was perhaps the turning point for the mainstream media as it brought down the government of General Musharraf, who ironically is credited to have liberalized the media in 2002. Before Musharraf allowed private television channels to obtain licenses to broadcast in the country, there was not much of a mainstream independent news industry. Private media was restricted to a few independent newspapers, but given low literacy rates, the circulation of newspapers has always remained low in Pakistan, and therefore cannot be considered mainstream.

Explaining the reasons for the change of policy in Pakistan, Rehmat says he believes: "Musharraf did not liberate the media for altruistic reasons — he did it to wean Pakistani audiences away from watching neighboring country's Indian satellite channels, which they were tuning into in their millions in the early 2000s, to track news about Pakistan, because Pakistan's only TV channel back then, which was state-owned, carried no proper news."

Just before the private news organizations were able to obtain broadcast licenses, Pakistan was engaged in a conflict with India, known as the Kargil War. During this war, which was fought between the two nuclear neighbors in 1999, Pakistan Army troops entered Indian territory in a bid to cut off supplies to the Indian military in the Indian-administered Kashmir region. Pakistan lost this war, as it was a miscalculated adventure orchestrated by General Musharraf — however, instead of introspecting, Musharraf blamed the loss on the country's inability to propagate its own narrative in the local and international press, which he felt India was able to do successfully.



INTOLERANT: Chief of Army Staff General Qamar Javed Bajwa



Pakistan is a democracy by declaration, but not by practice. Article 19 of its constitution 'guaranteeing' freedom of the press also in the same article defines limits on it, forbidding criticism of the military"

As a result, he began a campaign to privatize Pakistan's media in a bid to build a counter-narrative against neighboring India and the global opinion that was critical of Pakistan. But by 2007, the very media that was supposed to be a mouthpiece for the military, judiciary, aligned itself with political opposition in the country against Musharraf, managing to help to restore democracy in 2008. For the first few years after the restoration of democracy, Pakistan's media continued to be a fierce voice in raising awareness about human rights abuses, especially those carried out by the state.

But this freedom to be an independent voice came to a halt when Hamid Mir — one of the top news show hosts in the country, at Pakistan's largest news network, the Geo News — got shot at multiple times in 2014 while on his way to his news channel's head office in Karachi. Just before the attack, Mr. Mir had done a series of shows about one of the most sensitive military issues: the missing persons in the restive province of Balochistan that have been allegedly abducted by the military. For obvious reasons, the military does not want this topic discussed, so it is off-limits to journalistic investigation.

As Mir struggled between life and death in a Karachi hospital, his family and the network he worked for accused the Pakistan Army of orchestrating the attack. The industry quickly became divided on this accusation, and instead of standing up to and questioning the military, other major news industry players began to question the veracity of the claims by Mir's family and the network. The other rival news organizations initiated a counter-campaign against them, claiming Geo News and its parent television network were working on an anti-state agenda by blaming the armed forces. This led to an inter-media rivalry, which the Pakistani military exploited to its benefit. Soon Mir and the network he worked found themselves ostracized.



LIFE-AND-DEATH STRUGGLE:
GeoNews presenter Hamid Mir was shot at several times after discussing the sensitive military issue of Balochistan (Alamy)

Division and Unraveling: The Balochistan Issue

The situation worsened further when a religious group accused Mir's media organization of blasphemy over a song they had broadcast on their entertainment channel

Although unrelated to the incident with Mir, many observers believe it had been instigated at the behest of the Pakistan Army to pressure the media group into silence and punish it for pointing fingers at the military. Geo Network was shut down for weeks following the blasphemy allegations, and only came back on-air after it unconditionally apologized to the military. By now, the media divisions had set in, and the industry was considerably weaker than before.

The divide in media post-Hamid was unfortunate. It was engineered by the security establishment, but made easier due to economic competition, broadly dividing up the media between legacy media interested in journalism and non-legacy media, which was mostly only interested in business and relationships with the powers-that-be," says Rehmat.

Following Mir's attack, issues pertaining to Balochistan province have almost disappeared from the mainstream media. Why is Balochistan a taboo topic? The province is the most impoverished region in Pakistan. Located in the southwest of the country, it shares borders with Afghanistan and Iran. The province has been experiencing an insurgency by the local ethnic population (called "the Baloch") for the past 40 years.

The Baloch complain that their province, which is rich in mineral resources, has given a lot more to the central government of Pakistan than it has received, and has suffered neglect under Pakistani leadership.

The Baloch now demand autonomy, with some even taking up arms to fight the state. In response, the Pakistani government has launched unannounced military operations in the region, and also regularly abducts Baloch people it believes to have sympathies toward the rebels.

In recent years, the province has again come under renewed interest and focus since the Pakistani government announced plans of for Chinese investment into the region under the name of the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor, promising more than \$50 billion of investment money flowing into Pakistan. Until now, the focus of the project has been Gwadar, the port city in Balochistan, but very little transparency has been offered to the press about the projects.

Several social development experts within the Baloch region I spoke to suspect China is being

given control of the port and the trade routes in and out of province in exchange for creating and enriching a ruling Pakistani elite. While there has been some local resistance to the project in the region, once again, the media has been instructed not to cover it. And those who have dared to report on the issue have had to deal with threats.

One such journalist is B.K., who wishes to remain anonymous because of the sensitivity of the issue. Like myself, he currently lives in exile in Europe, but his family in Balochistan have been harassed by security agencies in the country because of his reporting. B.K.'s troubles started when he reported a story about locals in Gwadar being deprived of water resources for an international media resource. Intelligence officials asked him to come and explain himself, and then informed him he was being put on the "Fourth Schedule."



AREA OF CONTENTION: The region of Balochistan is the most impoverished region of Pakistan, yet is rich in mineral resources (Google)



The Pakistani intelligence officials I met told me that I am serving a foreign agenda. They told me I am now a suspicious person.”

—B.K., a Baloch journalist

False Dawn: The Case of Pakistan’s *Dawn* Newspaper

Another case that has become emblematic of the media censorship is that of the *Dawn Newspaper*, Pakistan’s leading English newspaper. *Dawn* was launched by Pakistan’s founder, Mohammad Ali Jinnah, in 1941, near the time of country’s independence from the British in 1947. But even such a badge of national honor and prestige has not saved the paper from the onslaughts of the country’s powerful military. Although *Dawn* is considered the last news organization standing against the widespread censorship prevalent in the Pakistan media, one of its leading journalists, Cyril Almeida, is currently facing treason charges over a frivolous petition, which many legal experts believe does not merit a case — but apparently, under the directions of the government, the courts have initiated a treason case.

In May 2018, during the run-up to the Pakistan’s general elections on July 25, 2018, Mr. Almeida published a story in the *Dawn Newspaper*, in which he interviewed Pakistan’s former prime minister, Nawaz Sharif, who was recently jailed by an accountability court in the country. The former prime minister claims he is being hounded by the security establishment of the country — a common

The Fourth Schedule is a list of “proscribed” individuals who are suspected of terrorism and/or sectarianism under Pakistan’s Anti-Terrorism Act of 1997.

“The Pakistani intelligence officials I met told me that I am serving a foreign agenda. They told me I am now a suspicious person. Given that I am Baloch, doing journalism became a nightmare for me especially since I was working for a foreign news outlet in Balochistan,” says B.K., adding that there are many more things he does not wish to share, even anonymously, as the constant harassment he experienced forced him to flee his homeland.

B.K. adds: “When we [journalists] work with Western media, they harass us even more because they can manage the local media, but international media is out of their control, and many stories that they want to keep away from the public eye get coverage globally, which becomes a problem for them. I defied that, and because of that, I was put on an anti-terror watch list locally known as 4th schedule. This limited my movement and required me to report to police before I left the city.”

B.K. wants to return to Balochistan, but he is unsure of his safety. “I want to do better things for my people and for Pakistan. I expose those who want to control my people with the barrel of a gun. And I am not alone in this. There are many who are resisting against them. How many can they imprison, torture or make disappear? If I may not be able to go back today, I am optimistic, and I believe I will be able to go back tomorrow,” he concludes.



JAILBIRD: Pakistan’s disgraced ex-Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif

REUTERS

CALAMITOUS “COLLUSION:” Following Dawn journalist Cyril Almeida’s (right, seen being escorted from court) interview with Sharif, in which Sharif questioned the military’s actions during “the Mumbai Attack,” both were accused of colluding in treason and defamation. Meanwhile, fellow Dawn journalist Nusrat Javeed (below right) suffered an assassination attempt after losing his job

euphemism used to refer to the Pakistan Army — because he has challenged their stronghold over foreign and defense policy in the country.

In his interview with Almeida, Sharif made a reference to the Mumbai attacks of 2008, and questioned the policy of allowing militants to cross over to the other side. The Pakistan Army has been accused of allowing such jihadis to use Pakistani soil to organize and take part in regional conflicts in Afghanistan and Kashmir, as well as to carry out terror acts in neighboring countries such as India and Iran. The “Mumbai Attack,” in which over 170 people were killed, involved Lashkar-e-Taiba, a militant group ostensibly banned in Pakistan.

Once Almeida’s interview with Sharif was printed in *Dawn Newspaper*, a lawyer filed a petition stating that the journalist and the former prime minister had spoken against the country, and the courts subsequently initiated a treason case against both the former prime minister and the journalist, claiming they colluded in “defaming national institutions.” This was despite the fact Pakistan’s own law enforcement agencies have acknowledged that the Mumbai attackers went to India from Pakistan, and that Lashkar-e-Taiba was involved in the attacks. Therefore, many experts believe targeting *Dawn* over this story is just an excuse for harassment of the newspaper, as the real reason for this case is *Dawn*’s reluctance to toe the military establishment’s line. Like any other independent media organizations, *Dawn* is also currently facing a financial crunch, and has been forced to close some of its publications and fire employees to manage costs.

One *Dawn* journalist who recently lost his job is Nusrat Javeed, who used to host a prime-time talk show on the Dawn News TV channel, a subsidiary of *Dawn Newspaper*. Mr. Javeed is known to be a vocal critic of the Pakistani “deep state,” another term used to describe the military establishment in the country.

But even after losing his job, Mr. Javeed’s troubles have not ended. In December 2018, he was subjected to an assassination attempt while on his way home. His vehicle was shot at, and his tires were flattened. He managed to keep the car under control and survived the accident, which could easily have been fatal. He reported the incident, but the police have been reluctant to investigate the case, and have told him that the incident was more of a road accident than an attack. Javeed believes the police has been pressurized to not investigate the case.



REUTERS

“

The ‘Mumbai Attack,’ in which over 170 people were killed, involved Lashkar-e-Taiba, a militant group ostensibly banned in Pakistan.”



Journalism Pakistan

In Deep: Military Censorship of Journalists and Social Media Commentators

While it may appear the Pakistani military silences those who are critical of its policies, investigations prove the censorship goes deeper than that

While it may appear the Pakistani military silences those who are critical of its policies, investigations prove the censorship goes deeper than that.

Journalists are now routinely harassed over stories that have nothing to do with security affairs such as Fawad Hasan, a young reporter living in the southern port city of Karachi, who found out at first-hand when he was forcibly taken away by security officials and tortured extensively. Thankfully, his torturers released him after a few hours because there were other journalists who witnessed his abduction, and they went on record to testify against this, creating pressure on the authorities to release him.

“At first I thought they were targeting me for expressing my views about the military on social media, but I found out they had problems with my stories that focused on violation of labor rights in Karachi,” says Mr. Hasan, who did a series of investigative stories on multinational companies that were exploiting poor laborers in Karachi.

Hasan continues: “In early December 2017, I was notified by a labor leader that a military official had called him in for a talk. He told me they had shown him a file with my name on it, and the official had told him they would soon deal with me. After he disclosed this to me, I asked a relative who is a bureaucrat to find out if the military was indeed after me. It turned out that the military officials were just waiting for the right time and would pick me up soon at

any time. And they attempted to do this on December 29, 2017. However, I was on a bike, and luckily, I escaped. I went into hiding, and it was after many requests to the military officials via people who knew them that an intelligence agency official from the Pakistan Army agreed to talk to me.

“I was called in in January 2018 to an office in Karachi where I met a serving officer. He showed me a file that contained clippings of my published work, and said I was doing a lot more reporting than what was supposed to be allowed in Pakistan.

“To my surprise, he asked me to stop covering labor issues because according to him, it was presenting a

negative picture of Pakistani industry to the world. He then told me there were many ways I could be stopped, and advised me to oblige.”

After this meeting, Hasan kept quiet for some time, but he was soon reporting the same issues again, as that was his journalistic beat. Which is when he was taken away, but luckily, they soon let him go.

While Hasan's tormentors have been from the military, he feels more betrayed by his own industry. Says Hasan: “There were very few people who supported me. My paper, editor, unions were of no use. In that time I realized how vulnerable journalists are in Pakistan. My editor laughed at me when I told him what was happening to me. He said he didn't believe me.”

Hasan's experience reveals one of the biggest issues in countering the threats towards those working in the Pakistani news media industry: the weak role of journalist unions, press clubs and senior news practitioners who endorse limitations by the Pakistan's deep state, and do not stand up for their journalistic brethren.

One of the main reasons for this is the rampant corruption found among these unions due to financial benefits some of them have received from the government over time. The government has allotted many journalists plots in prime real-estate locations at subsidized rates, and the greed for being allotted these plots has led to rivalry between the different unions and press clubs, and resulted in divisions and a weakening of the overall industry from present-

“

He asked me to stop covering labor issues as I was presenting a negative view of Pakistan... he then told me there were many ways I could be stopped”

ing a united front to fight back.

A relevant example of this can be seen in the Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists. Currently, there are three separate factions for it, and each one claims to be the true representative of journalists.

Given these divisions, some of these journalistic associations are now no longer safe from physical intrusions. For example, in November 2018, in Karachi, where Hasan was targeted for covering labor issues, security agencies barged into the Karachi Press Club, for the first time in its history of its existence of over six decades.

The authorities justified this so-called raid by saying they were tracking down terror suspects they believe had entered the premises, but those journalists present on location say they believe it was intended to send a message to the journalistic community that no place remains out of bounds for the authorities.

But it is not just the mainstream media industry that is currently facing censorship in Pakistan as now the state authorities have begun to crack down on those who are vocal on social media, too. The social media crackdown started early in 2017 with the targeting and kidnapping of social media activists who run satirical and political commentary pages and accounts on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube.

These kidnaps were allegedly committed by the Pakistan Army. Some of these activists spent a few weeks in secret prisons, others a few months. Almost all those who came back have since fled the country.

One of these recent social media activist exiles is Waqas Goraya, who currently lives in the Netherlands. When he was abducted in January 2017, he was visiting his home town of Lahore for a family wedding. While he was in custody, he



CENSORSHIP: General Asif Ghafoor has demanded that only positive views be reported in the media

was sexually abused and physically tortured, and was asked to sign an agreement that would claim he was working at the behest of Indian intelligence agencies to defame Pakistan's institutions. However, he never signed the agreement.

Fortunately for Goraya, one of the administrators of his group's social media page who was also picked up had a sibling working for a well-known international news organization; thankfully, they made enough noise through Pakistan's civil and journalistic community so that the social media activists that had been abducted were released.

After this incident, many other social media accounts that were critical of the state have begun to be silent. Only a handful continue to operate in the same manner. Many of those who were targeted once again in May 2017 received threatening phone calls from the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA), Pakistan's premier law-enforcement authority, asking them to explain their social media

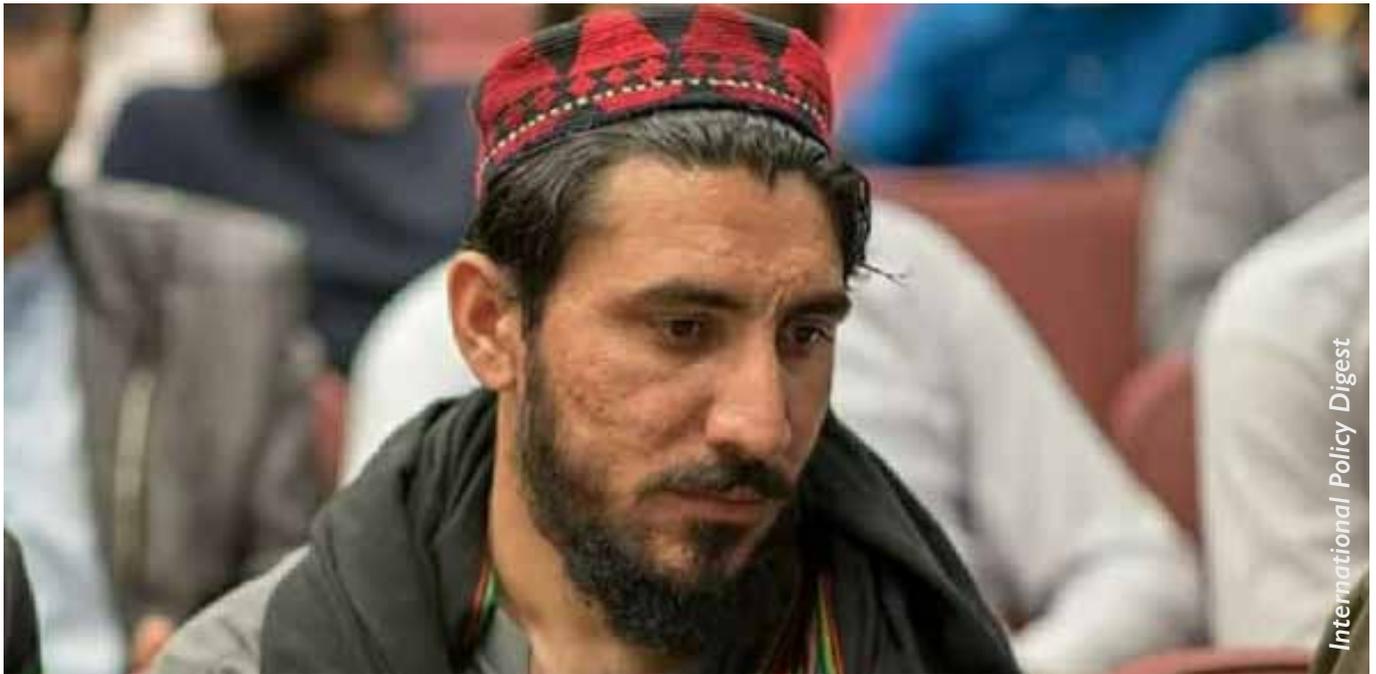
activity. They were told they were violating Pakistan's counterterrorism and cybercrime laws. A list titled "Accounts maligning the military and judiciary" was circulated on the media that had the names of some three dozen individuals. Some of these people were arrested; others were illegally detained.

Like many other journalists, I received a similar warning and summons from the FIA asking me to present myself for an investigation in front of them, or alternatively, face arrest. I refused to oblige, and instead challenged them at the Islamabad High Court with the help of a prominent lawyer, Asma Jahangir.

The courts demanded that the FIA present evidence of the objectionable content, but the FIA never filed a satisfactory response. Following that, the courts told the agency to refrain from harassing me, but a few months after this incident, I survived the abduction and potential assassination attempt I described earlier.

More Crackdowns as Authorities Impose Anti-Social Media Restrictions

It's not just the Pakistani authorities that have been intimidating those who voice dissent and criticism on the internet.



RESISTANCE: Mansoor Pashteen began the Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement in the wake of an extra-judicial killing of a Waziristani youth

The government has also been taking down websites, according to independent digital rights activists in Pakistan. Currently, over 800,000 websites are estimated to be banned in the country. And prominent social media websites have had to face bans in the country, too.

As an example, YouTube was banned for almost five years, and was only allowed to broadcast in the country when they agreed to introduced a localized version for the country. The ban came into force in 2012 after an anti-Islam film, “Innocence of Muslims,” was uploaded to the site, sparking violent protests across major cities in Pakistan.

Similarly, Facebook was also banned for some months over a contest for a cartoon drawing of the prophet Mohammad, which was deemed offensive to Muslims. Once Facebook was restored, it began collaborating with the Pakistani authorities. In fact, Pakistan has emerged as one of the top countries in the world for requesting censoring of content on Facebook, as a new official report by the social media giant revealed in December 2018. According to an analysis of the Facebook report, Pakistan made 2,203 requests for content restriction — the highest in the world — during the first

six months of 2018, more than a 700% increase in such requests compared to the corresponding period within the previous year. Pakistan has about 36 million Facebook users, according to the company data.

In addition to taking down “subversive” pages, Facebook is also suspending anonymous accounts in the country, especially those found talking about the Pashtun Tahaffuz (Protection) Movement (PTM). Pashtuns are the second-largest ethnic group in Pakistan, mostly in the northwest of the country, next to Afghanistan’s border. They became embroiled in the War on Terror conflict after 9/11, and have been squeezed between the military and the militancy that has taken root in their region after the fall of the Afghan Taliban’s government in the neighboring country, with many of the terrorists taking refuge among them.

The Pashtuns feel they have been targeted by Pakistani security forces due to their location, and fear they are being stereotyped as terrorists when they are in fact victims of terrorism themselves. They have challenged the military narrative on the war, and questioned military operations in their area, along with rampant human rights abuse against their ethnic group.

“

Twitter has also sent out legal notices to Pakistani users telling them they have been violating Pakistani laws and explaining that they are reaching out to due to ‘official correspondence.’ ”



KIDNAPPED: Social media activist Waqas Goraya was abducted, tortured and sexually abused

Gandhara

PTM subsequently arose as a grassroots movement launched in the country by a fiery young man named Manzoor Pashteen. Pashteen hails from Waziristan, a Pashtun-dominated region in the northwest of Pakistan. His struggle began in the wake of an extra-judicial killing of a Waziristani youngster in Karachi city, allegedly by a policeman currently facing a trial over the same incident. However, as authorities have been reluctant to act against the officer, many believe he is being protected by representatives of the Pakistan Army in the city, and that he has been carrying out such killings in the city at their behest.

Given that it challenges the preferred military narrative, PTM is completely banned from coverage by the mainstream media, and therefore most of the PTM leaders and followers rely on social media for news and information. But with the ongoing crackdowns against social media, many PTM activists have also complained of harassment.

One such user, who wishes to remain anonymous, alleges that Facebook may even be passing private information to the government — an accusation about Facebook that was recently echoed by international digital rights organizations, too. He says, “Facebook suspended my account first, and then asked me to send me my personal information along with a photo of me holding my ID card if I wanted my account reactivated, which made me suspect that they may be passing this information on to the Pakistani authorities as I have been anonymously campaigning for PTM, and have quite a huge following on social media.” This Facebook user claims he then faked his documents to avoid giving Facebook any real information.

Other users have also complained of their posts being limited to an audience in Pakistan. It is ironic, however,

that pages that promote militancy and hate speech against religious minorities continue to operate freely on the platform without any restrictions, which also reveals Facebook’s dual policy towards censorship.

Facebook is not the only social media channel that intimidates its online users. Twitter has also sent out legal notices to Pakistani users telling them they have been violating Pakistani laws and explaining that they are reaching out to due to “official correspondence”. I also received a similar notice, and my account was subsequently suspended twice within 72 hours. After prominent social media users and journalists reached out to the Twitter management on my behalf, my account was unsuspected and the staff sent me a clarification explaining that it was done in error, and they did not come under any pressure and would stand up for freedom of expression as that is their main objective. Nevertheless, Twitter’s legal team continues to send these messages to other Twitter users in the country, which has resulted in many choosing to go silent on the platform.

Besides using authorities and social media giants to silence critics, Pakistan’s military has also been running social media cells with troll armies that attack dissent and try to discredit credible voices on social media by running fake hashtag trends and spreading propaganda against users. These troll armies are run by youths hired from Pakistani universities who are used to organizing online hate campaigns. A few years ago, I met some of these students, who had been tasked with following prominent social media accounts and were volunteering at the military media wing in Rawalpindi, where the Pakistan Army is headquartered.

What Lies Behind the Press-Silencing Project

While the project to silence press has been ongoing over the past few years, observers feel one of the main reasons the Pakistani authorities have stepped up this campaign against the media in the past year or so is because of the country's growing alliance with China, which has promised to make investments into the country. As Pakistan becomes closer to China and its relationship with Western countries and its former allies weakens, Pakistan's drift towards authoritarianism is only likely to grow. It is, however, interesting to note that although direct attacks on journalists in recent years have gone down, the industry is becoming more muted by the day.

As media activist Rehmat explains, pointing toward the increasing trend of self-censorship in the media: "While the overall trend of fatal attacks on media practitioners has gone down, other forms of coercive intimidation have increased, such as instituting cases against journalists under cybercrime laws for their private social media posts or manipulating the sackings of media employees or the harassment of their families. This has engendered a climate of self-censorship that is accentuated by the increased acceptance by their media employers of intimidation by state authorities."

This is confirmed by the data, which shows that as many as 88% of the Pakistani journalists who participated in a recent research on self-censorship were most likely to hold back information related to religious and security matters in their reporting and personal conversations. The findings are part of a study entitled, "Surrendering to Silence: An Account of Self-censorship among Pakistani Journalists," which was prepared by Media Matters for Democracy (MMfD). MmfD concluded in their report that the journalists also considered the policies of their own news organizations as a major reason for their professional self-censorship.



Twenty-six journalists have been killed in Pakistan in just five years, and more than 100 have been murdered in the past decade and a half."



TAHA SIDDIQUI

Taha Siddiqui is an award-winning Pakistani journalist based in Paris, France. He has been living in self-imposed exile since February 2018, after surviving an abduction and possible assassination attempt in January 2018 at the hands of armed men believed to be from the Pakistani Army.

Mr. Siddiqui has reported for numerous reputable international news organizations, including The New York Times, The Guardian, France24, Al Jazeera, The Christian Science Monitor, The Telegraph, Arte, etc. In 2014, he won the Prix Albert Londres – also known as the French Pulitzer Prize – for his documentary on

the spread of polio in Pakistan and Afghanistan. He continues to write about Pakistan while in exile, and is currently writing a book about his home country.

Mr. Siddiqui also manages a digital media platform, safenewsrooms.org, which documents media censorship in Asia. The platform was shortlisted for the Prize for Independence by RSF Press Freedom Awards in November 2018. His focus areas include human rights, civil military issues and terrorism. Siddiqui is also a visiting faculty member at the prestigious French university, SciencePo, where he lectures on Social Media and Journalism.

View more of our reports at:

www.investigativejournal.com/reports





REUTERS/Photographer

THE INVESTIGATIVE JOURNAL
— TRUTH IN JOURNALISM —