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TRUTH IN JOURNALISM

## Khan's Pakistan: Three TV Stations Shutdown in Renewed Media Clampdown

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عظیم جلد ہی معاشی استحکام پر قوم



**Pakistan** is currently ranked **142nd** out of **180** countries in Reporters Without Borders 2019 World Press Freedom Index.

Pakistan has long experienced press censorship issues, which are getting worse; it is ranked 142nd out of 180 countries in Reporters Without Borders 2019 World Press Freedom Index, three places lower than in 2018.

But a more brazen campaign to silence media began in the wake of the controversial July 2018 elections, marred by irregularities, that saw Imran Khan's PTI party win with the backing of the military. Though many believed that once the new government of "choice" was in place, things would calm down, they have taken a turn for the worse.

Just this week, three news channels have been taken off-air from all local cable networks under the orders of Pakistan's Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) after broadcasting a Punjab province rally of the Pakistan Muslim League (PML-N) opposition leader Maryam Nawaz Sharif. Nawaz, the daughter of Pakistan's former prime minister Nawaz Sharif, has been leading the PML-N party while her father is in jail on corruption charges. She herself was convicted on corruption charges in 2018 but her sentence was suspended.

A message saying "This channel is currently unavailable due to a technical issue. Sorry for inconvenience." went up on screens of Abb Takk TV, 24 News, and Capital TV. These are among the most popular of Pakistan's around 40 TV channels.

Ms. Nawaz is finding it hard to get any coverage of her political activities in the country<sup>1</sup> because she recently released a video<sup>2</sup> that purportedly shows the judge – who sentenced the former PM Sharif to jail on corruption charges – accepting that he did so under blackmail. It is unclear from the video who pressured him, but it is widely believed<sup>3</sup> that the Pakistan Army was behind the blackmailing of the judge, a practice they have been accused of before. In a subsequent press release, the judge denied that he was pressured and demanded legal action against the PML-N.

Following the release of the video, the media regulatory body PEMRA also issued notices to 21 TV channels for broadcasting an “unedited live telecast” of the PML-N leader where she had released the video. In the notice, PEMRA said the press conference contained allegations against the judiciary and state institutions, and the broadcast thus violated its regulations.

Recently, Ms. Nawaz also complained of being muted on live TV, sharing a video clip on her social media account showing how the audio would disappear whenever she started to talk about the judge’s “confessional” video.

On paper, PEMRA is supposed to give a notice to news organizations and ask for

explanation whenever it thinks they have violated its code of conduct. What is worrying about the recent actions is that the channels were just taken off air, and no explanation was given nor sought.

In an interview to Reporters without Borders (RSF), the international news rights organization, AbbTakk TV news director Shahab Mehmood said, “We have been taken off cable network without any notice. PEMRA gave no reason for taking this step.”

RSF further said in a statement that the TV channels were “deliberately removed at the behest of the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA), the all-powerful broadcast media regulator that takes its lead from the military establishment.”

Najam Sethi, a well-known journalist who works with 24 News, confirmed in a tweet that it was because of their coverage of Maryam Nawaz Sharif’s press conference that the three TV news channels were being taken off the air “reportedly on orders from PEMRA.”<sup>4</sup>

The Pakistan Broadcasters Association (PBA) came out in support of the channels saying that a complaint had been lodged by three of its members — AabTak, 24News and CapitalTV — against the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) for “taking their channels off air from cable networks without assigning a reason or giving them a hearing”.



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1 <https://gulfnews.com/world/asia/pakistan/pakistan-tv-channels-censured-for-airing-maryam-press-conference-1.65104256>

2 <https://www.dawn.com/news/1492479>

3 <https://www.economist.com/asia/2018/06/21/pakistans-army-is-using-every-trick-to-sideline-nawaz-sharif>

4 <https://twitter.com/najamsethi/status/1148241329568305152>

In a statement<sup>5</sup> issued on Tuesday, the PBA “condemned taking off air” the three channels. The PBA asked PEMRA to “restore these channels immediately and follow its laid down rules in case there was any complaint against these channels or they had violated the code of conduct”. The PBA further added that “not giving them the right of hearing and unilaterally taking them off-air was against all norms of justice and threatened freedom of expression.”

This development comes a week after jailed former president Asif Zardari’s interview was taken off air a few minutes after it had begun on



*A message appearing on screens of Abb Takk TV, 24 News, and Capital TV, two of Pakistan’s most popular TV channels.*

GEO News, one of the leading news channels in the country. No official explanation was given for that either. Hamid Mir, the prominent journalist who had conducted the interview, later tweeted “We are not living in a free country.”

Following this the government also asked PEMRA to block any further media coverage and interviews with politicians “who are convicts and under trial.”

Even the print media is facing a tough time. In May 2019 Pakistan’s leading English newspaper, Dawn, stopped getting advertisements from the government, one of the main sources of revenue for the local media. Reporters Without Borders condemned the move.<sup>6</sup> Earlier, one of Dawn’s

reporters, Cyril Almeida, was accused of treason, charges that he continues to face in the Pakistani courts.

Another domain where journalists are facing harassment in Pakistan is social media. Three prominent journalists critical of the military and the Khan-led government recently deactivated their social media accounts, amidst reports that they were pressured to do so by their management. This comes after a hashtag calling for the arrest of well-known journalists became the top Twitter trend in Pakistan on July 4 and 5. Pakistani Twitter users trended [#ArrestAntiPakjournalists](#) hashtag, tagging many of the well known journalists in the country as “pro India”. It appears that this campaign was organized by the PTI (Imran Khan’s name was used) and the military.

Sadly, such intimidation tactics are the mildest dangers that journalists have to face in Pakistan.

At least 26 journalists have been killed in Pakistan during the last five years for their journalism work, and 25 of these cases remain unsolved according to Freedom Network Pakistan, an independent rights group based in Islamabad. In the one case that was solved, the conviction of the accused by a lower court was later overturned by a superior court.

“We have no genuine democracy in Pakistan, and it is not just curbs on the freedom of press in Pakistan” says Khushal Khattak, a prominent human rights activist based in Islamabad. Reached in a phone interview, he continued, “There is a state clampdown on all progressive forces, voices and movements in the country, be it mainstream political parties, grassroots movements or international or local NGOs.” But Mr. Khattak is hopeful about the Pakistani press. “The censorship model seems to be headed towards how the press operates in China, but there is a lot of resistance because Pakistan has too many voices to silence. There has been a push back, so it won’t be easy for the state to enforce a blanket censorship.”

5 <https://pba.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/PBA-1562603771.pdf>

6 <https://rsf.org/en/news/crude-intimidatory-tactic-state-ads-withheld-pakistani-daily>



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