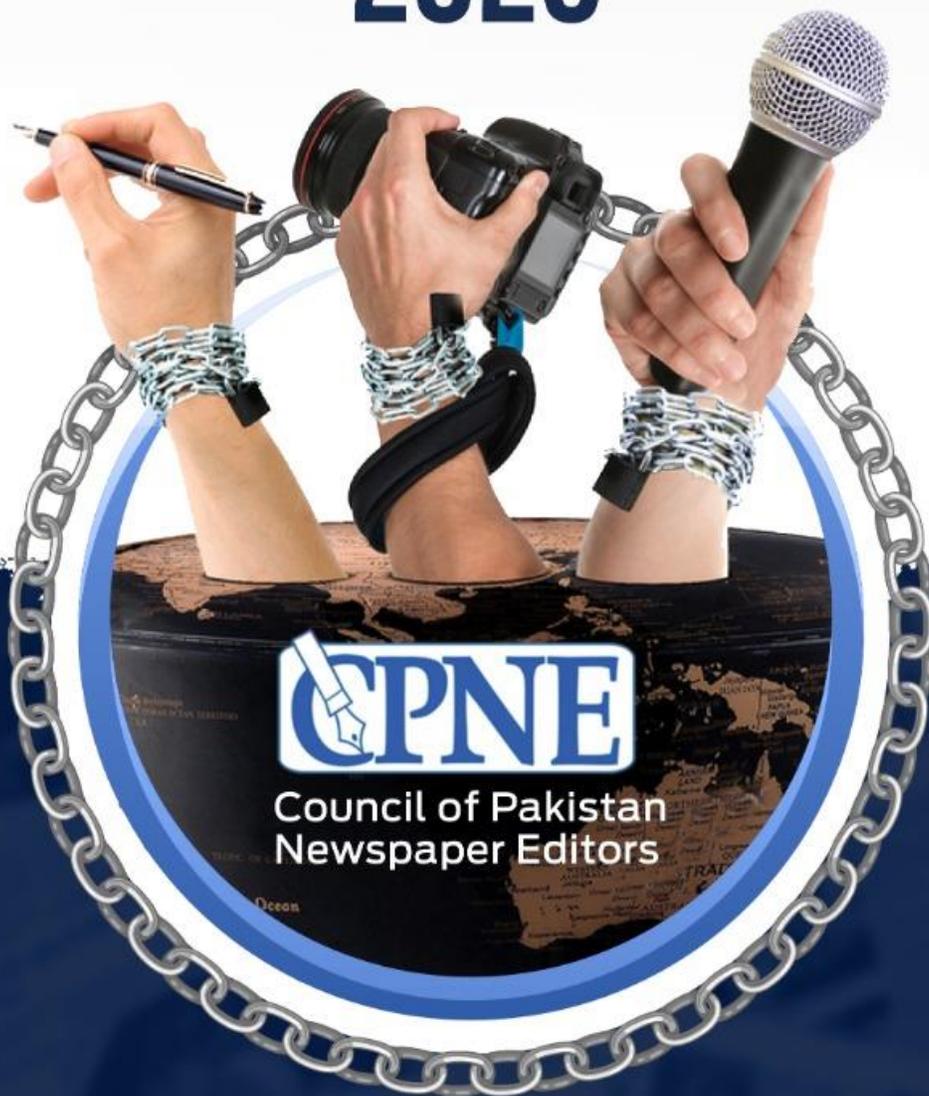


PAKISTAN  
**MEDIA  
FREEDOM**  
REPORT  
**2020**



Council of Pakistan  
Newspaper Editors

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## SUMMARY OF THE REPORT

During the year 2020, at least 10 Pakistani journalists lost their lives in the line of duty; several others were abducted, tortured or received threatening calls. Due to the corona virus pandemic, the media, like all spheres of life across the world, including Pakistan, faced economic problems.

The media globally confronted new and varied challenges to freedom of expression. Pakistan media was also impacted directly by the pandemic. On the one hand, the adoption of safety measures in the newsroom proved worrisome, while on the other, the adoption of SOPs during corona virus reporting also presented its own problems.

According to the Council of Pakistan Newspaper Editors (CPNE) ‘Media Freedom Report–2020’, more than eight journalists lost their lives due to COVID-19 across the country and a number of others got affected but recovered. Books authored by Muhammad Hanif and Sohail Warach were confiscated by the authorities in Lahore and Karachi. Pakistan Rangers personnel, violating the institution’s sanctity, on July 27 barged into the premises of Karachi Press Club (KPC).

Senior PTI leader Jahangir Tareen sent defamation notices worth Rs1 billion each to anchorpersons Shahzeb Khanzada and Waseem Badami for ‘false imputation’ in their current affairs programs, aired on January 21 and 23, respectively, that he (Tareen) too shared the collective responsibility for rising sugar price in the country along with the ‘sugar mafia’.

During the year several newspapers had to close shop. The Federal Information Ministry de-notified more than 6,000 publications after declaring them ‘dummy’ newspapers. At the same time, the Office of Press Registrar, Ministry of Information, gave an April 15 deadline to all presses that print newspapers to fulfill all regulatory requirements. On June 6, the registrar sent an advisory to the provinces to close down all unregistered publications, printing presses and news agencies.

In August, Pakistan Broadcast Corporation (PBC) terminated the services of Radio Pakistan’s 320 contractual employees across the country, without any prior intimation. Later on October 21, PBC sacked 749 Radio Pakistan contractual employees, again without any prior notice.

Due to non-payment of salaries, two media persons could not bear economic pressure and lost their lives. One of them, a cameraman, Fayaz Ali, who was associated with *Capital TV*, died of cardiac arrest on January 23 after he was fired from his job without being given his 10-month

salary dues. The other one was Mazz Akhtar, an associate producer at Bol News, who committed suicide on November 5 because of domestic problems resulting from prolonged non-payment of salary.

On numerous occasions, Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) tried to control media through bundles of notices to TV channels and unnecessary legislation, which resulted in acute confliction and consternation among the media community.

Along with controlling the conventional media, efforts were also made to manage the new social media as well through proposed regulations for web TV and over-the-top (OTT) content services. Such proposals were rejected as 'unnecessary' by more than 18 organizations and prominent personalities, including the CPNE.

This unconstitutional and biased governmental measure led to various social media companies expressing the possibility to exit Pakistan thus aggravating the online freedom of expression situation in the country. Later on, the Ministry of Information Technology formed a committee to review social media rules. On November 18, the ministry notified the legislation for social media under the title of 'Removal and Blocking of Unlawful Online Content (Procedure, Oversight and Safeguards) Rules 2020', framed under the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act 2016 (PECA). On December 18, the Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists (PFUJ) filed a petition against this new legislation in the Islamabad High Court (IHC). However, after the imposition of this rule the government has acquired legal cover to continue blanket bans on digital content.

## CPNE MEDIA FREEDOM REPORT 2020

During the year 2020, at least 10 Pakistani Journalists were killed in the line of duty; several others were abducted, tortured, or received threatening calls, according to available data. Due to the corona virus pandemic, the media, like all spheres of life across the world, including Pakistan, faced economic problems.

According to data collected from different media resources, journalists had to face dangerous and grave challenges while fulfilling their responsibilities in the field of reporting. On the one side, during the news coverage journalists and media workers were dealing with COVID-19 as frontliners, while on the other, they faced extreme difficulties in respect of press freedom and freedom of expression in the war to bring truth to the fore.

The success of the Pakistan Tehreek e Insaf (PTI) during the previous general elections owed much to the unprecedented media coverage and the social media. Despite this, after coming to power, the government officials are persistently indulging in legal proceedings against journalists discharging their journalistic responsibilities and creating additional difficulties by issuing statements at the international forums like: ‘Stop reading morning newspapers’, or ‘stop watching evening talk shows on TV’. It is not the first time that government functionaries have attempted to place restrictions on the freedom of expression. On several occasions, the authorities indulged in rhetoric against press freedom at national and international platforms. In an interview with *Al Jazeera* in September, Prime Minister Imran Khan said: “Unfortunately, it’s us – the government and its ministers – who ‘feel unprotected’. It's not the media.”

On an occasion prior to this, in a meeting with YouTubers in April, while accusing newsmen of ‘*Lifafa* journalism’, the prime minister said that “Pakistani media is used to hide politician’s ‘corruption’. TV anchors are given money to air anti-government programs and current affairs shows have become 'meaningless' for people.”

According to the search reports on press freedom, between January-December 2020, journalists in Pakistan performed their professional duties remarkably well despite working under increasing restrictions. The conspiracies to limit the freedom of expression through various means gained momentum. All gambits, ranging from torture and murderous attacks on journalists to creating financial crises in media institutions, were employed. But no actions were taken against the perpetrators.

Commando activities against media outlets and printing presses also occurred. Media circles termed these actions as pressure tactics against the media. An atmosphere prevailed in the country as if the attackers on journalists and media workers enjoyed immunity from punishment.

The legal system of the country is proving useless in providing protection and justice to journalists, which is an alarming situation.

## COVID-19 EFFECTS ON MEDIA

All the people associated with the media struggled hard to handle the growing incidents of COVID-19, as it was essential for journalists and media workers to be in the forefront to perform their duties. For reporting and news coverage, they often had to talk to those who had either fallen victim to the virus or were deputed to treat them. Because of this, journalists, cameramen and other personnel were quickly affected by this disease and nine journalists from among them lost the battle for their lives. This was a serious situation reflective of the non-seriousness, as well as carelessness, in the implementation of necessary measures to ensure the safety of media workers and their protection against the virus.

Along with ensuring the measures against corona virus, media personnel and journalists faced several other new challenges, like how to do reporting of the pandemic situation. Verification of news was a complicated process, because the social media was rife with fake news in this regard. The accuracy of the statistics was also an important issue. Apart from this, the world had to bear an economic crisis in the wake of lockdowns to check the spread of virus. In addition to this, in Pakistan the media institutions and media workers resolutely confronted the governmental statement spree.

## JOURNALISTS WHO LOST THEIR LIVES TO PANDEMIC

- April 27: Former president of the Associated Press of Pakistan Employees' Union and senior journalist Zafar Rasheed Bhatti passed away due to the corona virus.

- April 30: Muhammad Anwar, a crime reporter at daily *Khabrain*, died of COVID-19 in Sukkur within a few days of testing positive. He was the first journalist in Sindh to die of the virus.
- May 26: Senior journalist Fakhruddin Syed, associated with *92 News*, died of COVID-19 at Peshawar's Hayatabad Medical Complex (HMC).
- May 28: Two employees of Radio Pakistan – Muhammad Ashfaq, a senior broadcast engineer, and Huma Zafar, an Urdu newscaster – succumbed to corona virus the same day. According to Radio Pakistan, Muhammad Ashfaq was a permanent staffer and an able professional, while Huma Zafar had been reading national bulletins in CNO PBC on contract for the last two decades.
- June 25: Veteran journalist Abu Talib Nizami, better known as A.T. Nizami, died of Covid-19.
- September 14: Journalist Mohammad Hanif Zai, from Thar, who was associated with *Geo News* and daily *Jang* passed away while fighting Covid-19.
- November 14: Senior journalist and TV anchor Arshad Waheed Chaudhary passed away due to Covid-19.
- December 17: Senior journalist Tariq Mehmood Malik lost his life to Covid-19 at the age of 50.

## KILLED IN THE LINE OF DUTY

According to available data, during the January-December 2020 period, at least 10 Pakistani journalists were killed in the line of duty. They included Sajid Hussain, who had left Pakistan and gone into self-imposed exile in Sweden after receiving threats on his reporting on the so-called separatist movement in Balochistan. According to reports, he was kidnapped on March 2 while travelling from capital Stockholm to Uppsala city. On April 23, his body was found in the Fyris River outside Uppsala. Different rights associations have expressed the apprehension that his journalistic work may be the cause of his death.

Three other journalists – Zulfiqar Mandrani, Shaheena Shaheen and Qais Javed – were shot dead in their homes by unidentified assailants. Qais Javed was a Christian, and according to his

family he was killed because of his faith. However, Javed ullah Khan, Anwar Jan Khetran, Abid Hussain Abidi, Noor Hassan Lanjwani and Malik Nizam Tani were gunned down by unknown attackers in the vicinity while returning home. The body of Aziz Memon, a reporter at Sindhi news channel *KTN*, was found in a canal in Mehrabpur, Sindh. According to police, he was choked to death with a wire.

Unfortunately, Pakistan is one of those countries where journalists are murdered brutally and their killers get unannounced impunity. Only in the case of Aziz Memon and Anwar Jan Khetran, a joint investigation team (JIT) was constituted. Despite this the mystery of Aziz Memon's murder could not be solved. Same was the situation in the murder of Qais Javeed of D.I. Khan. It is a fact that not a single killer of journalists and media persons has been brought to justice.

## THREATENED AND PRESSURISED

A vast majority of journalists and media worker were deliberately pressurized by higher officials through tactics like physical assault, intimidation, threats, harassment, and registration of cases on cooked-up charges, fake FIRs or illegal detentions. The verbal and physical harassment of journalists during their professional duties by higher officials, office holders and the government paints a bleak picture for press freedom and the safety of journalists in the country. In the year 2020, we witnessed numerous incidents of journalists and media workers being of target of varied threats. These have been categorized as follows:

### 1. PHYSICAL ASSAULTS

In various incidents, not only journalists but their families also faced physical assaults and torture. Reports indicated that at least ten journalists were directly targeted not only by non-state actors but also by state actors. The journalists and media workers who suffered physical abuse were: *VSH News* Reporter Sajjad Noor and Cameraperson Rehan Bizenjo, Jameel Ahmed Mahar from *Sindh* daily, *Samaa TV* Saeed Ali Achakzai and Sanjay Sadhwani, *Khyber News* TV journalist Abdul Mateen Achakzai, Bureau Chief of *92 News* (Hyderabad) Hameed ur Rehman, local journalist Tanveruddin Burki, and two journalists from online news media *Voicepk.net*.

## 2. FAKE FIRs OR ARRESTS

According to reports, government officials and departments filed a number of cases against journalists. The most high-profile case of 2020 was the arrest of the Jang and Geo Media Group's Editor in Chief Mir Shakil ur Rehman on March 12. He was arrested by the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) in a 34-year-old case related to 54-kanal land he allegedly acquired “illegally”, during the tenure of then Chief Minister of Punjab Nawaz Sharif. Only after a day of Mir Shakil ur Rehman’s arrest *GEO TV* transmissions were also targeted. The cable operators were directed to shutdown its broadcasts or to shift the channel to the last numbers. Through this unnatural, one-sided and unconstitutional measure not only an attempt was made to pressurize the country’s largest media group but it raised several apprehensions arose regarding press freedom.

Despite numerous local and international demands for his release, Rehman had to remain behind bars for about eight months, after which the Supreme Court granted him bail on November 8, 2020.

During the coverage of court hearing of an appeal filed by Maryam Nawaz against her conviction in the Avenfield corruption reference, Islamabad Police arrested a *Channel 24 HD* reporter Ehtisham Kiyani, who had arrived at the High Court for coverage. On February 25, Shaukat Ali of PTI submitted an application to the Federal Investigation Agency’s (FIA) cybercrime cell against two television hosts Murtaza Chaudhry and Mustafa Chaudhry, political satire programme hosts on *Neo TV*, for ‘insulting’ Prime Minister Imran Khan.

During the year, law enforcing agencies targeted journalists and media workers more often for their professional work or stories. Unannounced and covert censorship appeared to be tightening when journalists were threatened and harassed not only for expressing their view on traditional media but online and social media platforms as well. The discharge of their professional duties became a crime for journalists.

On January 17, journalist Azharul Haq Wahid, associated with *Channel Five* and *Khabrain* daily, was arrested by the FIA for making ‘anti-state’ remarks and criticizing former military dictator Pervez Musharraf on Facebook and an FIR was registered against him under Sections 11 and 20 of the Pakistan Electronic Crimes Act (Peca) 2016.

On July 15, 2020, the Supreme Court (SC) took suo motu notice of a Matiullah Jan tweet. Later on July 21, Islamabad High Court (IHC) dismissed a petition for contempt proceedings against the journalist over the same tweet.

In September 2020, an FIR was lodged against *Express Tribune (ET)* journalist Bilal Farooqi by a private citizen, who worked in a factory, for sharing content against law-enforcement agencies on social media. Senior journalist and former PEMRA Chairman Absar Alam and Asad Toor fell victim to similar incidents. FIRs were registered against them under 131 PPC, 124A, 505, 499, 20 PECA, and Section 6 (high treason) and under sections 499, 500 and 505 of PPC and sections 11, 20 and 37 PECA, respectively.

In an incident that occurred in Sukkur, the local police registered a number of fake cases against journalists Imdad Phulpoto, Sahil Jogi, K B Sheikh and others. On December 22, newsmen from the Sukkur Division staged a sit-in in front of the AIGP Office against the registration of false cases and demanded the withdrawal of fake FIRs as well as the removal of SSP Sukkur.

### 3. ABDUCTIONS

One week after the dismissal of the contempt of court petition against Matiullah Jan's tweet, he was kidnapped on July 21, 2020, in broad daylight from Islamabad's Sector G-6. Nearly 12 hours later, after strong protest by media organizations and journalistic circles, he was released and returned home safe and sound. However, no explanation has been provided for his abduction so far. A case was registered at the Islamabad Police Station, whereas the Supreme Court (SC) had rejected the report of the IG Islamabad on the kidnapping with remarks that the IG had still not learnt how to investigate a case on modern lines.

Another journalist from *Geo News*, Ali Imran Syed, went missing from Karachi's district East on October 23. A few hours earlier he had broadcast a CCTV footage of the arrest of the PML-N's leader Captain Safdar Awan from a hotel in Karachi. On October 24, after missing for 22 hours, he returned to his mother's home safely.

#### 4. ANONYMOUS PHONE CALLS

Journalist Ahmed Noorani received death threats for publishing an investigative report about the business fortunes of close relatives of a retired army officer. Another Peshawar-based reporter of an internet news agency, *Tribal News Network*, Mehrab Shah Afridi, received threatening phone calls from an unknown individual for his reports on social media in his hometown of Landi Kotal. As per reports, Afridi covered a sit-in where ethnic rights group Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement (PTM) leader and Member of the National Assembly (MNA) Ali Wazir addressed the crowd. As soon as Afridi uploaded the video of the speech on social media, he started receiving calls from anonymous callers warning that he and his family members would face dire consequences even death. He registered an FIR against the caller but due to lack of resources the local police dropped the investigation.

In other instance, during February and March, *Geo News* reporter Asif Ali Bhatti received threatening calls from Afghanistan. He was warned to stop reporting against the state and religious scholars, otherwise his family would be eliminated. Despite reporting the matter to them, the law enforcement agencies took no action.

#### 5. ONLINE HARASSMENT

During the year, a rise was witnessed in online harassment by the supporters and social media wings of the ruling parties. Because of the current pandemic, like elsewhere around the world, in Pakistan also new ways were explored to discharge professional responsibilities in line with the precautionary measures (SOPs). Media workers, along with people in all other walks of life, were provided the facility to work from home. Several media organizations cut down the number of their active employees by 70 to 80 per cent. While this facilitated women in media industry they had to face other hardships as well. On September 8, a petition was filed by a large number of media women against online harassment, included gender-based ridiculing and sexualized abuse. The petition was signed by around 140 women journalists and media persons, including Nasim Zehra, Asma Shirazi, Fareeha Idrees, Batul Rajput, Mehar Bokhari, Gharidah Farooqui, Maria Memon and Tanzila Mazhar.

On December 8, Manmeet Kaur, Pakistan's first Sikh woman journalist from Sikh community from Peshawar, demanded investigation against her harassers and torturers. The

unidentified person also threatened to leak a video footage showing her and her husband being subjected to physical torture.

## 6. LITERATURE MATERIAL TARGETING

On January 6, British-Pakistani journalist and author Mohammed Hanif tweeted that some people from official quarters raided the premises of his publisher Maktaba e Daniyal and confiscated copies of the Urdu translation for his a decade -old book “A Case of Exploding Mangoes”. In a second tweet, he added that a week before this incident he had received a defamation notice from the son of former military dictator General Ziaul Haq.

In another instance, which took place on September 15, prominent Pakistani journalist Sohail Warraich’s book was removed from bookstores country wide after certain officials objected to its cover. Later on, the book was reproduced with a new title cover.

## 7. MEDIA HOUSES SHUTDOWN

It is Unfortunate that when we talk about press freedom, freedom of speech, right of access to information, media crisis, etc., we only discuss matters related to journalists and media workers, but completely overlook the issues confronting media houses, which ultimately affect journalists and media workers. These problems are caused by shrinking of their revenues, discrimination in the distribution of state-controlled advertisements, unlawful restrictions on the circulation of some newspapers in certain areas, and other campaigns against the dissidents or vehicles of independent opinions.

Media’s economic crisis was present way before the pandemic occurred, but due to COVID the situation got worst. Thousands of journalists and media workers have been rendered jobless, as media houses or their stations were shutdown overnight. Many more journalists have been compelled to accept unbearable cuts in their wages and delays in salaries. Two journalists, who could not cope with that sudden shock of losing their jobs or delay in salary, lost their lives.

The list of media houses that had to shutdown or downsize their workforce is as follows:

- On March 5, Urdu daily *Asian News*, publishing from Lahore, was shutdown after a year-long financial crisis. Seventy media workers and journalists lost their jobs.
- Business tycoon Malik Riaz suddenly decided to close his Urdu language *Aap News* television channel, in April, citing "unavoidable legal and technical reasons", and rendering hundreds of jobless overnight.
- On April 4, The Federal Information Ministry de-notified more than 6,000 publications identified as dummy papers. At the same time, the Office of the Press Registrar, Ministry of Information, gave a deadline of April 15 to all presses printing newspapers to complete all regulatory requirements. Later on June 6, all unregistered publications, printing presses and news agencies were closed down on the orders of the Press Registrar.
- On June 8, state-run Pakistan Television (PTV) fired two employees without prior notice.
- Local TV channel VSH was shutdown on July 29 by PEMRA. This rendered hundreds of workers and journalists jobless. It was the only privately-owned channel that aired programmes in Balochi language.
- In August, PBC terminated the services of Radio Pakistan's 320 contractual employees across the country without any prior notice. Later on October 21, PBC terminated the services of Radio Pakistan's' an additional 749 contractual employees.
- On November 31, the names of provincial, regional and local newspapers were removed from the media list for not fulfilling the criteria under the KP Advertisement Policy 2018.
- On December 7, PTV's newly appointed Chairman Naeem Bukhari, terminated the services of eight contractual officers of the state-owned organization.
- The transmissions of privately owned news channel *24 News HD* were suspended on several occasions during the year. As a result thousands of media workers and journalists were rendered jobless.

Due to non-payment of salaries, two media persons could not bear economic pressure and lost their lives. One of them, a cameraman, Fayaz Ali, who was associated with *Capital TV*, died of cardiac arrest on January 23 after he was fired from his job without being given his 10-month salary dues. The other one was Mazz Akhtar, an associate producer at *Bol News*, who committed suicide on November 5 because of domestic problems resulting from prolonged non-payment of salary.

*Dawn* employees protested against forcibly demanding resignation from workers by the newspaper management; retrenchment of workers, non-implementation of the Eighth Wage Award. A large number of journalists, media workers, rights activists, representatives of trade unions, political activists and other members of civil society, staged a demonstration outside Dawn's office and marched to the Governor House from Haroon House and held demonstrations there on November 26 and December 2 respectively.

## 8. OTHER THREATS

Pakistani blogger Ahmad Waqass Goraya received threats from higher officials in February. Later on he was kidnapped and subjected to torture. He fled to Europe but came back to Pakistan on April 10.

During the first half of 2020, two robbery attempts were made at senior journalist Imtiaz Alam's house. In the second attempt, five robbers tried to break into the house. However, the security guard foiled their attempt. The criminals then smashed the security camera. However, their video was saved on the camera. Something similar to this happened with a Senior Crime Reporter of *The News*, Faraz Khan, and his wife. They were mugged at a short distance from the FB Industrial police station in the wee hours. In another instance, Pakistan Rangers personnel barged into the premises of the Karachi Press Club (KPC) on July 27 and violated sanctity. Not only this, the Federal Information Ministry staff conducted a numbers of un-announced raids on newspapers and printing houses across the country. Such activities are being termed by press freedom organizations as unethical and an attempt to harass the print media.

The most bizarre instance took place when the Petroleum Division put the blame for the LNG crisis on the media because of its investigative stories on the issue.

Senior PTI leader Jahangir Tareen sent defamation notices of Rs1 billion each to anchorpersons Shahzeb Khanzada and Waseem Badami. He contended that the two anchors in their current affairs programmes had leveled "false imputations" that Tareen, along with the 'sugar mafia' was responsible for "causing artificial inflation of refined sugar" across the country. The current affair programs were aired on January 21 and 23, respectively.

## ROLE OF PEMRA AND PTA

Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) on numerous occasions did its utmost to control the media; issued notices to TV channels and unnecessarily legislated a law to control the media coverage. This created great consternation among the media community.

These acts on the part of authorities gave rise to some serious concerns regarding press freedom, freedom of expression, right of access to information countrywide – a basic right of every citizen according to Article 19 and 19-a of the Constitution of Pakistan.

PEMRA banned the broadcast of anchorperson Kashif Abbasi's '*Off the Record*' on *ARY News* for 60 days after PTI minister Faisal Vawda's outlandish stunt on the show.

*Neo TV* was fined Rs. 1 million for their news story about the enhancement in the Prime Minister's salary.

On numerous occasions during the year, television channels were shifted to last numbers. Coverage was switched off-air during the PDM rally/ jalsa on September 20. Later on October 1, PEMRA banned the broadcast of speeches, interviews and public addresses by absconders and proclaimed offenders.

In an another instance, PEMRA warned TV channels against airing unethical slogans, play cards with objectionable content, in an advisory regarding the annual Women's Day march, the Aurat March held on March 8.

On June 25, PEMRA issued a directive to all electronic media houses regarding reporting and coverage of COVID-19.

PEMRA targeted channel *24 News HD* by suspending its license several *times with 'immediate effect'*. *The first instance happened on July 3 when PEMRA suspended the channel's*

license with ‘immediate effect’ for ‘illegal transmission of news and current affairs content’ without prior notice. Rawalpindi-Islamabad Union of Journalist (RIUJ) organized a protest outside the headquarters of PEMRA, attended by a large number of media workers and journalists, against the suspension of the license of TV channel 24 News HD and the high-handedness of PEMRA authorities. The guards of PEMRA headquarter resorted to Ariel firing to disperse the protestors. The matter got resolved when Lahore High Court (LHC) suspended PpEMRA’s order and directed restoration of the license.

On August 31, PEMRA once again suspended the license of 24 News HD with ‘immediate effect’ for ‘airing hate inciting content’ during a special live Muharram transmission in Arabic language.

On October 1, PEMRA suspended the license of the private regional channel 7 *News* for violating rules by airing transmission in Urdu.

The Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) also barred news channels from covering the Lahore motorway rape case.

On September 11, PEMRA imposed a complete ban on *Bol Entertainment’s Tick Tock Show* with immediate effect, under Section 27 of the PEMRA Ordinance.

Later on October 9, PTA banned *TikTok* app countrywide over complaints against 'immoral content'. After huge opposition regarding the decision, PTA had to unblock the entertainment app *TikTok* after assurance from its management that they would block all accounts involved in spreading obscenity and immorality.

## LEGISLATION TO CONTROL MEDIA AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Attempts to control conventional media were extended to the new media as well, through proposed regulations of web TV and over-the-top (OTT) content services. This was opposed by more than 18 organizations and 36 prominent individuals.

On February 11, the federal cabinet approved the Citizens Protection (Against Online Harm) Rules 2020, a move critics denounced as an attack on freedom of the press and free speech in the country. Under this Act, the authorities would be empowered to regulate all social media platforms; to fine or ban social media platforms over their users’ content. Social media

companies such as *Facebook* (which owns *WhatsApp*), *Twitter* and *Google* (which owns *YouTube*), would be obliged to disclose any information or data to a designated investigation agency, when sought. If Pakistani authorities deem any content as ‘unlawful’ it would be removed within 24 hours. Failure to abide by any of the provisions would entail a fine of up to Rs500 million. The information to be provided may include subscriber information, traffic data or content data.

This led to various social media companies threatening to leave Pakistan, creating a grim picture for the opportunity for free expression online. Later on, a committee was formed by the Ministry of Information Technology to review social media rules. On November 18, the ministry notified that social media rules ‘Removal and Blocking of Unlawful Online Content (Procedure, Oversight and Safeguards) Rules 2020’ have been framed under the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act 2016 (PECA). On December 18, a petition against this law was filed by the PFUJ at Islamabad High Court. However, after the enactment of this law the government has acquired legal cover to issue blanket bans on digital content.

## FOLLOW-UPS OF PREVIOUS CASES

- On April 8, the Sindh High Court acquitted journalist Nasrullah Chaudhry in a case of possessing banned literature and spreading hatred against the state. After his sentence was overturned he was released from jail.
- On April 2, the Sindh High Court (SHC) overturned the death penalty handed to the main accused, Ahmed Omar Saeed Sheikh, in the Daniel Pearl murder case. On April 22, the Sindh Government challenged the SHC’s decision in the Supreme Court of Pakistan.
- On June 15, The Karachi police claimed to have arrested a key suspect, who had been awarded death sentence in absentia by an antiterrorism court, in a case of murdering TV journalist Wali Khan Babar. The arrest of the murderer took place after more than nine years after the incident.

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