

COMMENT 193 - The Curious Case of Media ‘freedom’ in Pakistan

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Pakistan yet again featured on global headlines when on Tuesday, May 21 2020, a journalist, relatively critical of the country’s military and security agencies, was kidnapped in broad daylight by men in police uniforms. Matiullah Jan, who works in Islamabad, was picked up at around 11 a.m. by 10 men after he arrived at a school to drop off his wife for work.

The kidnapping became the headline on the country’s social media – with journalist associations, civil society and opposition politicians demanding Jan’s release. Twelve hours after his kidnapping, and after consistent pressure exerted by civil society on social media, Jan [posted](#) on his Twitter account that he was back at home safe:

I am back home safe & sound. God has been kind to me & my family. I am grateful to friends, national & int. journalist community, political parties, social media & rights activists, lawyers’ bodies, the judiciary for their quick response which made it possible, Jan tweeted.

While narrating the ordeal of his kidnapping [on his YouTube channel](#), Jan explained how men in Police uniforms picked him up from outside his wife’s school. He further explained that soon after he was picked up, he was kept in a cell in an unknown location with his face and eyes covered. He believed that his kidnappers were the same people ‘who have always remained against democracy and the country’s constitution’.

Jan’s case is not the first related to the tougher media restrictions applied in the last two years. In June this year, the United Nations asked in a letter addressed to the Imran Khan-led PTI government to explain the detention of Mir Shakil ur Rehman, owner/editor of the

Jang/Geo newsgroup. UN's special rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion, David Kaye, [asked in the letter for the government](#) to provide detailed information regarding the legal grounds for the arrest and detention of Mir Shakil-ur-Rehman – including why the charges against him were pressed 34 years after the alleged offence.

In the last two years, the electronic media in Pakistan has endured one of its worst phases in history – with news channels [firing dozens of employees](#), while other channels critical of the government [saw their licenses revoked](#). Ahmed Khan Malik, Secretary of the Karachi Union of Journalists (KUJ), revealed last year that between 2018 and 2019, nearly five thousand journalists and media workers were rendered redundant. This downsizing was partly due to the ailing economy and partly due to the PTI government not being considered as beneficial for the (media) business.

A financial crunch is not the only barrier currently faced by the country's media. The government has also been accused of imposing curbs on the freedom of expression – with journalists such as Matiullah Jan facing censorship in different forms.

In April last year, Najam Sethi, a renowned journalist and editor/founder of the Friday Times weekly as well as a staunch critic of the current government, was issued a notice by the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) for airing 'false' news regarding the marital life of Prime Minister Imran Khan. Soon after, cable operators across the country were forced to block the channel 24 News, where Sethi conducted his show, from most territories in the country.

Similarly, since Imran Khan 'election' as the country's Prime Minister in 2018, various senior journalists critical of the government and the military have been asked to either fall in line with the 'pro-government' narrative or risk losing their employments.

Talat Hussain, another renowned journalist hosting a primetime news show on Geo News, was forced to quit after remaining critical of the military as well as of PM Imran Khan and his government. Hussain declared to [The Guardian](#) that his show was shut down because the military was unhappy with his analyses.

“My programmes were being repeatedly censored. I was told that any suggestion that the 2018 elections were rigged or that the army was part of the running of the government by Imran Khan was unacceptable.... I was told by Geo News administration that they could not air my analysis because the army, represented by ISPR [the media wing of the Pakistan

armed forces], was very unhappy and they would shut down channel transmission if I continued to speak like I did”, revealed Hussain.

Even though Pakistan has witnessed three democratic transitions since General Musharraf’s ouster in 2008, the country’s democratic progress has stagnated. Experts both within and outside the country believe that much of the democratic progress achieved in the previous two governments of the PPP (Pakistan Peoples Party) and the PML-N (Pakistan Muslim League – Nawaz) might well be entirely dismantled if Khan completes his five years in power. This is because Khan is seen to be ‘on the same page’ with the military, which means that there remains little room for establishing ‘civilian supremacy’ in the country.

However, Pakistan’s post-colonial ‘hybrid’ democratic orientation – with a strongly placed military – is such that placing the blame solely on Khan and his party for allowing the military to consolidate its power would paint an incomplete picture. Political parties in the past, especially in recent past, have often ‘accommodated’ the military. In a story infamously known as the [‘Dawn Leaks’](#), during Nawaz Sharif’s PML-N government, the military ‘forced’ the PM to fire his close aide after the government was accused of leaking civil-military meeting minutes to the media. Similarly, the PPP government under President Zardari [extended the tenure of](#) General Ashfaq Pervez Kiyani, as it was supposed to ‘strengthen the government and the parliament’.

However, in their respective tenures both the PPP and PML-N – even with such overtures towards the military – did manage to avoid surrendering total civilian control. However, as the current PTI government fails to prove its competence, it seems that the military has assumed ‘near control’ of virtually all important political (read Foreign Policy) and economic (read CPEC) matters in the country.

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