



INTERNATIONAL FEDERATION OF JOURNALISTS

PAKISTAN

PRESS FREEDOM REPORT 2025-26

PAKISTAN

Overview: Growing risks to journalism

During 2025-26, Pakistan's media environment steadily deteriorated and risks to independent journalism grew as state control over information became more structured, expansive and punitive. The draconian Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA), amended in 2025, was increasingly invoked as a mechanism of surveillance and intimidation, exposing journalists and digital commentators to investigation, arrest and prosecution over online speech and reporting. In parallel, digital regulation intensified – the National Cyber Crime Investigation Agency (NCCIA) conducted raids and summons; courts ordered blocks on journalists' YouTube channels; and repeated internet and mobile shutdowns disrupted reporting and public access to information. Economic pressure on media compounded legal and technological controls. Government advertising and payment of dues were used to influence editorial compliance. Across the sector, wage arrears and weakened labour protections eroded independence while job losses and media closures illustrated deepening precarity.

The period was also marked by persistent threats and violence against media workers. At least three journalists were killed, while assaults, arrests, multiple legal cases against journalists and an unprecedented police raid on the National Press Club in Islamabad underscored the risks facing the profession. Women journalists faced overlapping harms including workplace harassment, deepfake attacks, censorship measures and detention while covering public events. Against this backdrop, unions and rights bodies, including the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), pressed for reform and accountability, while Pakistan's press freedom standing remained deeply concerning.

State controls

The period under review marked a deepening crisis for media freedom in Pakistan as state control tightened. The clampdown on reporting created an environment in which the practice of independent journalism grew difficult. This was evident in the aggressive use of legislation to suppress dissent, most notably through the PECA, which was controversially amended in early 2025 to make it more draconian. Instead of safeguarding netizens, PECA evolved into a tool of surveillance and intimidation, enabling authorities to pursue journalists over online commentary, social media posts or investigative reporting.

Several journalists, digital commentators and YouTubers were arrested, investigated or prosecuted on vague allegations such as “fake news,” “anti state content,” or “digital terrorism,” culminating in the extraordinary sentencing of some journalists to life imprisonment by an anti terrorism court. Rights groups including Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists (PFUJ), Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP), IFJ and others repeatedly warned that the law was being weaponised to stifle free expression.

Alongside legal pressures, digital controls intensified, reflecting the state's growing focus on information management. The NCCIA escalated raids, summons, and inquiries targeting journalists. Courts ordered the blocking of some YouTube channels run by journalists or political commentators. Internet and mobile suspensions became routine, especially in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, often justified under security pretexts.

The state also exerted influence through financial controls, using economic pressure to shape media compliance. Government advertising, long a lifeline for many media outlets in Pakistan, was selectively withheld most prominently through the near total suspension of ads to the Dawn media group. This was widely condemned by media bodies as an attempt to cripple critical reporting. Payment of dues to various media houses was delayed or made

conditional on administrative criteria, reinforcing the vulnerability of financially strained newsrooms.

This period also saw increasing coercion and intimidation. Journalists faced harassment, violence, and retaliatory actions by state institutions. A shocking police raid on the National Press Club in Islamabad on October 2, 2025, marked an unprecedented breach of press freedom norms, shaking public trust in the safety of journalistic spaces. Even as the government announced the formation of a Press Safety Commission in late 2025, media bodies questioned its efficacy citing persistent impunity in cases involving threats, attacks and surveillance. In March 2026, in the backdrop of the war in West Asia, the government warned media against reporting anything it deemed adverse to the country's national interests.

Economic impact

No salaries: During the review period, Pakistan's media sector remained constrained by persistent wage arrears eroding journalists' independence. Amendments to the Protection of Journalists and Media Professionals Bill facilitated the circumvention of judicial recourse in pay disputes while authorities in Punjab province in August 2025 imposed conditional state advertisement payments to enforce timely remuneration. A rare labour rights victory occurred in September 2025 when the Rawalpindi-Islamabad Union of Journalists (RIUJ) secured overdue wages at a private media outlet. Still, structural vulnerabilities endured, exemplified by state broadcaster Pakistan Television's inability to sustain a viable financial model, as parliamentary testimony confirmed that its PKR 11 billion (approx. USD 40 million) allocation for 2025-26 was inadequate to cover staff salaries and pension payments. In March 2026, the RIUJ wrote to the Ministry of Information seeking intervention to pressurise media houses to ensure payment of salary arrears before Eid to dozens of journalists of Neo News, Aik News, Abb Tak News, Suno News, Aaj News, Bol News and 365 News.

Job losses: The harsh economic climate in the period under review precipitated significant job losses across the country's media sector. In October 2025, employees at NewsOne TV faced dismissals amid an uncertain wage environment. November 2025 proved particularly devastating: at least 37 workers were laid off at digital outlet Nukta; 12 positions were lost with the closure of DawnNews.tv; and resignations were reported at Samaa TV amid a 30 per cent wage cut driven by an inter-institution financial strain. That same month, a Peshawar court ordered a digital news company to pay PKR 20 million (USD 72,000) in damages to journalist Ghulam Dastgir, citing contractual violations linked to his 2023 termination.

Media closures: The closures of media outlets in 2025 reflected mounting pressures on independent journalism. The discontinuation of Aurora Magazine, a 27-year pioneer in advertising and marketing, and the shutdown of DawnNews.tv, the Urdu digital arm of the Dawn media group, accompanied by layoffs, underscored the sector's deepening economic precarity. These setbacks highlighted escalating instability across the media landscape, prompting unions to demand stricter enforcement of labour protections and safeguards for employment security. In December, the IFJ cautioned that “Pakistan's government must take note of these closures not only as violations of labour rights but also as evidence of its inability to confront the looming crisis over the future viability of the country's media.”

Media launches: Despite challenges, Pakistan's media sphere shifted toward English-language and digital born platforms, privileging AI-driven broadcasting and globally oriented channels over traditional print ventures. July 2025 marked the launch of AsiaOne, a satellite network delivering international news with regional perspectives, alongside Next Pakistani, a digital-first outlet covering current affairs, technology, and lifestyle. The momentum carried into August with

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the debut of Pakistan Today English News, an AI-powered television service, and culminated in September as the state broadcaster expanded its reach through PTV Digital, an English-language digital channel.

Media dues: Government advertising, long a principal revenue source for Pakistan's media, remained a coercive instrument deployed to ensure acquiescence or suppress critical reportage. Since early 2025, the Dawn media group has endured sustained financial strangulation through the withdrawal of state advertisements, a move denounced by PFUJ and rights bodies including the HRCP, which warned of “grave concern over the rapidly shrinking space for independent and critical reporting.” A December 2025 news report exposed questionable allocations, citing the disbursement of PKR 524 million (about USD 1.8 million) to 110 Quetta-based newspapers between July 2024 and 2025 despite negligible readership. Fiscal pressures were compounded by taxation demands until February 2026, when the Islamabad High Court annulled a PKR 32 billion (about USD 114 million) levy imposed on 23 TV channels by the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA). In Punjab, the All Pakistan Newspapers Society (APNS) welcomed the reversal of a public procurement amendment that had prohibited the publication of government tender notices in newspapers.

AI in newsrooms

In the period under review, debates on artificial intelligence (AI) in Pakistan's media shifted from abstract discussion to cautious experimentation, though adoption across traditional newsrooms remained uneven. Initiatives such as Sahafat.AI, launched by Media Matters for Democracy in August 2025, introduced journalists to AI tools for research and verification, while the Sahafi Summit 2025 amplified debate and unveiled the country's first voluntary AI journalism standards stressing transparency and editorial oversight. Digital entrepreneurs also tested automated production, including Saga Digital, described in December 2025 as Pakistan's first AI-assisted newsroom.

Despite this, concerns about lack of adequate AI oversight in media persisted. In November 2025, Dawn, the country's biggest newspaper, mistakenly published an internal AI prompt, necessitating correction and scrutiny of in-house safeguards. Without standardised models or clear guidelines, ethical concerns over AI in journalism also surfaced. Collectively, these developments indicate that AI adoption in Pakistan while in an embryonic stage, is beginning to shape journalistic practice, professional debate, and emerging digital models.

Safety, threats and violations

The reporting period was marked by persistent intimidation and violence against journalists, media and other media practitioners in Pakistan.

Killed: At least three journalists were murdered. Among them were A. D. Shar, a correspondent for Hum News TV, who was fatally attacked by an armed group in Sindh's Thar region on April 15, 2025. Abdul Latif Baloch, affiliated with Aaj News TV, was killed inside his home in Awaran city, Balochistan, by masked assailants on May 24, 2025. Imtiaz Mir, a current affairs anchor with Metro 1 TV, was shot on September 21, 2025 by unidentified gunmen while commuting to work in Karachi, Sindh, in a car driven by his brother.

Arrests: Three women journalists – Farhat Fatima of APP, Sehrish Qureshi of Independent Urdu and Ismat Jabeen of DW Urdu – reporting on an International Women's Day march in Islamabad on March 8, 2026, were among over 40 women arrested by police. In December

2025, digital journalist Sohrab Barkat was arrested in a legal case under PECA law for criticism of state institutions. After over two months in detention, he was granted bail in mid-February 2026.

Attacks: In May 2025, social media commentator Atish Mehsud escaped an armed attack in North Waziristan, allegedly targeted for exposing corruption. That same month, journalists Nasr Ullah Khattak in Charsadda and Bilal Habib in Multan were assaulted while carrying out their professional responsibilities. In October 2025, the National Press Club itself became a target of state excess, as federal police damaged its premises, vandalised equipment and assaulted journalists present on site. In September 2025, three journalists – Bol News senior reporter Tayyab Baloch, News One journalist Faisal Hakim and journalist Ejaz Ahmed – were attacked by supporters of Pakistan Tehrik-e-Insaf party at a press conference. In March 2026, unidentified assailants opened fire on the residence of ARY News correspondent Ihsan Khattak in his hometown Bannu, in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Legal Cases: State authorities increasingly invoked legal measures to curtail journalistic activity. Multiple cases of legal action were recorded, including court orders in June and July 2025 to block 20 YouTube channels allegedly circulating anti state content. The cases were later partially suspended by a higher court. An anti-terrorism court, in January 2026, issued unprecedented sentences in absentia – two life terms, an additional 35 years, and heavy fines – against journalists Moeed Pirzada, Sabir Shakir, Shaheen Sehbai, and Wajahat Saed Khan, all living in self-imposed exile. Prosecutors alleged that they had incited violence during the political protests following the arrest of Pakistan's former Prime Minister Imran Khan in May 2023, and fostered hostility toward state institutions on social media. The defendants denounced the proceedings as deficient in due process, citing trials without their presence and restricted defence rights. In September 2025, journalist Shahbaz Rana was indicted in a defamation case concerning his reporting on federal revenue authorities. In September 2025, journalist, union leader and secretary of National Press Club Furqan Rao was served a legal notice by the authorities for unsubstantiated allegations relating to his association with news agency APP. In August 2025, four female journalists were charged under the PECA law for discussing a private issue in a WhatsApp group. In July 2025, journalist Muhammad Aslam was booked under PECA law for a report over alleged corruption. In August 2025, the Punjab government instituted a legal case against Samaa TV journalist Zulfiqar Haider for filing a report on alleged corruption in a health department.

Falling indices: Pakistan's journalist associations and their international counterparts voiced strong concern over the deteriorating state of media freedoms in Pakistan. The Pakistan Freedom of Expression and Media Report 2025 described the industry as facing an “existential crisis.” The country's ranking fell to 158 in RSF's World Press Freedom Index, and it was placed in the “very serious” category. A Commonwealth assessment similarly concluded that freedom of expression in Pakistan remains “highly restricted”. In July 2025, the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan convened a roundtable to address the contraction of digital spaces, urging regulation of hate speech and online harassment rather than curbs on political dissent or criticism of state policies. In February 2026, the Committee to Protect Journalists appealed directly to the Prime Minister to “uphold the country's constitutional and international obligations” to protect press freedom.

Women in media

Intimidation galore: As some key cases amply indicate, women journalists in Pakistan faced continuing and overlapping pressures of harassment, online abuse and censorship during the review period.

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In July 2025, Mahjabeen Abid, formerly with Pakistan Television, reported workplace harassment and feared retaliation after a previously accused male colleague was reinstated. Online trolling intensified as reporter Benazir Shah was targeted through a deepfake video on social media platform X in November 2025, with research in January 2026 describing this intensifying digital trend as “a pervasive violation of fundamental human rights that shapes who can speak, what can be said, and at what cost.”

State-induced censorship compounded these challenges.

Anchorperson Meher Bokhari's bank accounts were frozen without explanation in September 2025, while Nasim Zehra's political talk show was abruptly removed from broadcast in February 2026. The contentious PECA law was also deployed against media women in August 2025, when four were charged over a private WhatsApp group conversation. In a separate incident restricting the right to report and assemble, three women journalists were detained and tortured in March 2026 as they attempted to cover the annual Aurat March demonstration in the federal capital, with the IFJ condemning the exercise “as a violent crackdown on women journalists, particularly on International Women's Day.”

Representation: Findings of the Global Media Monitoring Project 2025 highlighted both Pakistan's acute underrepresentation of women in newsrooms and women's perspectives in journalism content, as well as the wider global neglect of gendered concerns in media narratives. Across 94 countries, women accounted for only 26 per cent of those featured in traditional news and 29 per cent in digital formats. Women in Pakistan accounted for only 11 per cent of those featured in traditional news, but were more visible in news online, at 26 per cent. Although the report noted some progress in women's inclusion in political and economic news coverage, their presence in sports reporting remained minimal at 0-10 per cent.

Campaigns for women in media: Pakistan's journalist unions, working alongside international media partners, advanced campaigns for gender equality, freedom of association, and leadership development.

The IFJ, supported by the National Endowment for Democracy, promoted representation through gender advocacy networks such as the Women's Media Forum Pakistan (WMFP), targeted gender programs, and collaboration with press clubs to foster inclusivity. Under the same campaign, Digital Media Association of Pakistan (DigiMAP), in March 2026, concluded From Presence to Power, a pilot advocacy initiative which brought together ten women digital media professionals to bolster their strategic role within Pakistan's evolving digital news ecosystem.

Media regulator gets a new woman chief: In February 2026, Ambreen Jan, a former information secretary, achieved a national first by becoming the first woman to be appointed to lead the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority. Her appointment marked a step toward gender affirmation in the country's media governance structures.

Evolving media

Internet and telecom controls: Direct access – without using virtual private networks (VPNs) – to social media platform X was restored for users in Pakistan in May 2025, ending a 14-month ban imposed by the federal government under the rubric of “national security”. The ban had provoked sustained legal and civic contention while its quiet reversal coincided with a four-day military conflict between India and Pakistan in the same month. Throughout the review period, Pakistan's digital infrastructure faced recurrent disruptions, particularly in the Balochistan province, affecting journalism. Provincial authorities attributed these suspensions to a “peculiar law and order situation” and the protection of religious processions during the sensitive month of Muharram. A notable 16-day blackout of internet and mobile services in August 2025 prompted judicial intervention, with the Balochistan High Court ordering restoration of communication services in at least five districts to safeguard public interest and constitutional rights. In September 2025, nationwide internet connectivity faltered again, this time officially ascribed to

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damage to a sub-sea fibre optic cable near the Saudi Arabian coast.

Social media controls: The period marked an intensifying campaign of state regulation over digital expression. In July 2025, an Islamabad lower court directed video-sharing platform YouTube to suspend 27 channels, primarily operated by journalists and opposition activists from the Pakistan Tehrik-e-Insaf party, on grounds of disseminating “fake, misleading and defamatory” material against state institutions. The order drew sharp criticism from rights groups and professional associations, including the Forum for Digital Rights and Democracy and the Supreme Court Bar Association, which denounced it as “a blatant violation” of constitutional freedoms and an illustration of cybercrime laws being weaponised to suppress dissent. Later that month, restrictions were partially lifted by a higher sessions court in Islamabad for at least seven channels, while YouTube formally acknowledged consideration of compliance with judicial directives. The same month, the federal government petitioned social media platforms to block 481 accounts allegedly linked to terrorist organisations and to disclose user data. By September 2025, official records indicated that, since its inception, the National Cyber Crime Investigation Agency had filed 356 cases for “anti-hate propaganda,” including 52 targeting the armed forces, and initiated 789 inquiries into social media posts deemed hostile to state institutions.

Countering impunity

During the review period, several judicial proceedings highlighted the precarious state of press freedom in Pakistan. In August 2025, an anti-terrorism court indicted a prime suspect in the attempted killing of reporter Nadeem Ahmed in Karachi, in a case dating back to 2024. The following month, the PFUJ-Workers bloc condemned what it described as a persistent culture of impunity surrounding attacks on journalists, stressing that successive governments had failed to honour repeated pledges to protect media professionals. In December 2025, an Islamabad court declared independent journalist Ahmed Noorani, founder of Fact Focus and currently in exile, a “proclaimed offender” in cases alleging dissemination of disinformation against state institutions. In February 2026, the Islamabad High Court referred journalist Matiullah Jan's case back to trial after forensic analysis confirmed that the substance seized from his vehicle in 2024 was not illicit. Jan had originally been charged with possession of 246 grams of methamphetamine, a claim widely dismissed by journalists and civil society as retaliatory, as a consequence of his critical reporting rather than credible evidence.

There were also positives, as key administrative and legislative decisions received a welcome response from the wider media industry. In November 2025, a 12-member multi-industry Commission for the Protection of Journalists and Media Professionals was constituted, tasked with safeguarding media practitioners and recommending measures against violence. Media bodies welcomed it as overdue recognition of journalist safety.

Rights campaigns

The IFJ advanced its advocacy for journalists' rights through two avenues during the reviewed period. First, it mobilised media workers by leading digital campaigns to raise awareness of labour rights, conducting research into media freedoms, and providing resources through online platforms. Second, the IFJ reinforced union structures by pursuing strategic reforms – ranging from constitutional revisions to foster inclusivity, to regional networking that encouraged collaboration, and leadership programs designed to cultivate resilience and vision within journalist unions.

In May 2025, the IFJ unveiled Modernising Journalists: Trade Unions in Pakistan for the Digital Age, a study urging the creation of secondary tiers of union leadership, the strengthening of house unions, and deeper member engagement, particularly focusing on freelance and women journalists. The report emphasised empowering journalists with agency, promoting broader intra-union dialogue to ensure adaptability in a rapidly evolving media landscape.

Lawfare

Media regulation and legislation: The period saw assertive laws restricting media and digital freedoms. The PECA law, amended in January 2025, extended the 2016 statute to criminalise “false or fake news” online, with penalties up to three years' imprisonment and heavy fines. It broadened disputed terms such as “aspersion” and “offensive content,” and created the Social Media Protection and Regulatory Authority (SMPRA), functional from March 2026, empowered to excise content and enforce platform compliance. Press unions condemned it as a coercive cybercrime law imposed without industry consultation.

The broader policy environment remains fraught. In September 2025, defamation tribunals were set up in three cities of the Punjab province under the Punjab Defamation Act of 2024, ostensibly to expedite litigation. Media bodies, however, criticised the law as a parallel justice system undermining judicial safeguards. The Punjab Defamation Act has drawn criticism from journalists' union and civil society, who challenged it in Lahore High Court in 2026, which put the authorities on notice. Likewise, enforcement under the PECA law in the period under review was liberally applied to online speech, raising concerns that cybercrime provisions are being weaponised to restrict dissent and digital commentary.

Resistance: The period brought heightened pressure on Pakistan's journalists, human rights advocates and politicians as prosecutions continued to erode constitutional protections of free speech. Various reports documented at least three journalists arrested, 12 served notices, and two human rights lawyers sentenced under the PECA law. The IFJ condemned the law's 2025 amendments as “draconian” and “a transparent attempt to further tighten control over digital expression and internet freedom under the guise of curbing misinformation.”

In June 2025, the Islamabad High Court set a final deadline for the federal government to respond to petitions challenging the amendments, later inviting proposals from journalist bodies to shape social media regulation. The following month, the IFJ urged the Supreme Court to intervene, pressing the government to review the problematic provisions and consult media stakeholders. In September 2025, the Senate Standing Committee on Information and Broadcasting, while reviewing PECA's country-wide implementation, ruled that 372 cases registered under the Act by provincial authorities were “illegal”, bringing relief to some of those prosecuted.

Meeting obligations

Pakistan's progress in fulfilling international obligations on press safety, labour rights, freedom of association and gender quality reveals a trajectory of only partial reform tempered with constraints. In July 2025, the Senate strengthened the federal Protection of Journalists and Media Professionals Act, introducing penalties for violence and coercion while creating mechanisms to address complaints related to security and employment.

This was followed in November 2025 by the establishment of a 12-member Commission for the Protection of Journalists and Media Professionals, tasked with monitoring threats and enhancing



Pakistan's Minister of State for Interior and Narcotics, Talal Chaudhry (C), speaks with media following a suicide bombing at the Shiite mosque in Islamabad on February 6, 2026. FAROOQ NAEEM / AFP

accountability. Together, these measures mark intent towards implementing Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) Target 16.10 but their impact remains to be seen.

Disinformation

State actions: State-led actions against alleged disinformation intensified markedly during the period under review. In June 2025, both federal authorities and Punjab's provincial administration escalated social media monitoring, instituting an 18-member surveillance committee to counter 'incendiary narratives' during the religiously-sensitive month of Muharram. In September, the federal government introduced a peace committee to broaden anti-hate discourse, while a Senate standing committee criticised the 'leniency' of sanctions imposed on journalist Rizwan Razi, urging an industry-wide ban for alleged racist remarks targeting the Sindhi ethnic community.

December 2025 witnessed further consolidation of state action as Information Minister Attaullah Tarar advocated the creation of a digital media association 'to enhance accountability', while Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi declared a "massive-scale" crackdown on alleged fabricated news, asserting that misinformation had reached alarming proportions. In February 2026, citing a "sensitive national situation", telecom regulator Pakistan Telecommunication Authority cautioned citizens against disseminating unverified or inflammatory content online, warning violators against possible legal consequences.

Court actions: Between late 2025 and early 2026, both domestic and international courts emerged as pivotal arenas for adjudicating defamation and disinformation disputes linked to digital platforms. In October 2025, Maryam Nawaz, the chief minister of the Punjab province, secured a judicial victory in the UK, where a high court ruled against Pakistan-based private broadcaster 92 News for falsely alleging that she acquired state gift through corrupt practices, compelling the outlet to issue a formal apology.

In January 2026, Pakistan's National Cyber Crime Investigation Agency reported to the Lahore High Court the arrest of at least eight individuals accused of orchestrating defamatory digital campaigns against senior judges. That same month, an Islamabad court sentenced renowned human rights lawyers Imaan Mazari and Hadi Ali Chattha to 17 years' imprisonment each over social media posts deemed 'hostile to state institutions'. Both often defend journalists facing legal cases in relation to their professional work.

In February 2026, judicial scrutiny intensified as the Islamabad High Court questioned the criteria for defining "fake news" under the cybercrime law, with state counsel asserting that amended legislation now permitted both aggrieved and third parties to initiate proceedings – a provision journalist unions warn could enable misuse especially because 'third parties' tend to be government functionaries or departments.

Alliances and campaigns

IFJ-supported collaborations: During the review period, IFJ spearheaded several collaborations aimed at revitalising Pakistan's media unions and advancing labour rights. In May 2025, it partnered with Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) and the Institute for Research, Advocacy and Development to release *Modernising Journalists' Unions in Pakistan for the Digital Age*. The report emphasised the need for second-tier leadership in media unions, deeper engagement with rank-and-file members, and strategies to help unions embrace digital transformation rather than resist it. Since 2020, the IFJ has also worked with the National Endowment for Democracy to strengthen unionism and labour protections. Under this initiative in 2025-26, the PFUJ launched a six-month strategic planning project to improve union governance and financial stability; the RIUJ advanced training efforts to advocate for equality-focused labour practices; the Karachi Union of Journalists revitalised its digital presence and internal communication; and DigiMAP announced a project to identify and mentor at least

ten emerging digital women journalists for leadership roles. These efforts reflected a broader push to modernise union structures, foster inclusivity, and reinforce protections for media workers.

Other initiatives: The period under review also witnessed notable collaborations advancing media development and rights, illustrating how domestic institutions and international partners converged to build capacity, promote responsible journalism, and strengthen resilience against misinformation and shrinking civil spaces. In May 2025, the National Commission for Human Rights partnered with Media Matters for Democracy to launch a fellowship for 12 journalists, designed to strengthen reporting on digital rights and internet governance through a gender-inclusive and rights-focused lens. In July 2025, UNESCO joined forces with Media Foundation 360, the University of Punjab, and SZABIST University to draft a policy framework aimed at integrating media and information literacy across Pakistan's education and communication systems. In November 2025, Information Minister Attaullah Tarar addressed the Developing-8 Media Forum in Baku, proposing an inter-bloc framework to establish shared fact-checking mechanisms and initiatives to counter rising disinformation, Islamophobia, and extremist narratives.

Initiatives from media unions

During the period under review, Pakistan's journalists' unions, often supported by international partners, mounted a reactive but determined defence against tightening state control over free expression and dissent. In February 2025, IFJ President Dominique Pradalié attended a PFUJ congress in Islamabad, lending weight to union protests against amendments to the cybercrime law and calling for the "abolition of PECA," the national cybercrime law that she warned posed a grave threat to journalism. In August 2025, the IFJ and PFUJ jointly condemned cases filed under the same law against journalists Zulfiqar Haider and Muhammad Aslam, describing them as "another transparent attempt to tighten control over independent and critical journalism." Between May and September 2025, the IFJ and FES launched a five-month project on strengthening the labour movement and journalists' rights. The initiative succeeded in bringing rival PFUJ factions together in various provinces of the country, forging consensus on union revitalisation and ensuring wider participation to defend media workers' rights.

In an environment starved of success stories, media unions in Pakistan achieved occasional victories. In September 2025, the RIUJ secured overdue salaries for Abb Tak News TV channel employees after months of delay – a rare labour success in a precarious media economy. In October 2025, videos of police officers assaulting journalists inside the National Press Club cafeteria sparked outrage. PFUJ, Council of Pakistan Newspaper Editors and Association of Electronic Media Editors and News Directors denounced the raid as "terrorism," prompting nationwide protests. The united front forced a state minister to issue an unconditional apology and Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi to order an inquiry.

These episodes underscore both the vulnerability and resilience of Pakistan's media unions, which remain reactive in posture but are capable of mobilising solidarity and extracting concessions in an increasingly hostile environment.

Front cover: Pakistani journalists gather in front of shipping containers after authorities blocked roads in Islamabad's Red Zone area on April 9, 2026, ahead of talks between the United States and Iran. The country's media continued to face persistent threats, physical violence, and state-led intimidation in 2025-26. FAROOQ NAEEM / AFP

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