

PAKISTAN

TIGHTENING CONTROL
AND ECONOMIC
COLLAPSE

The past year saw the Pakistani media dealing with long-standing threats arising from the 'war on terror' and armed militants, but also encountering a new war against economic insecurity, undeclared censorship, intimidation, media blackouts, harassment and coercive laws.

The current phase the media is passing through has been dubbed by many senior journalists as 'the worst', 'unprecedented' and not experienced even in earlier dictatorial military regimes.

In July, with the advent of the new government of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) headed by Prime Minister Imran Khan, a fresh phase of bullying and intimidation was unleashed.

The new government imposed a ban on releasing payments of billions of rupees to broadcast and print media owners. The billing for advertisement pertained to the outgoing government of Pakistan headed by the Muslim League, the key opponent of the PTI.

The non-payment of dues, which is believed to be an arm-twisting tactic of the government, led to severe financial crisis in the media industry. Media owners then carried out a ruthless retrenchment drive of journalists and non-journalist staff on the pretext of 'losses' which ever remain doubtful as financial accounts of the media owners are never made public and thus not auditable.

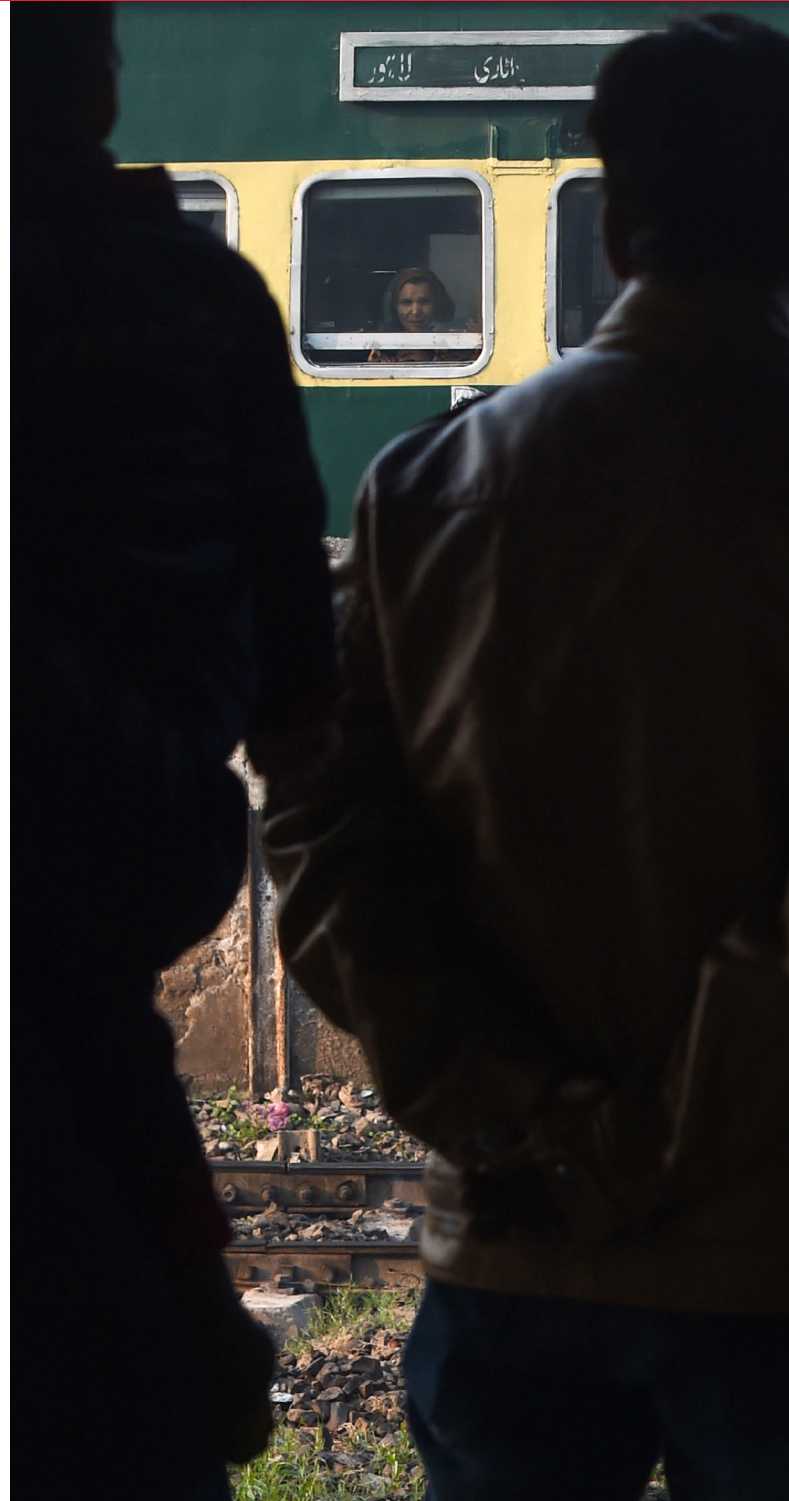
The November 8 raid on Karachi Press Club (KPC) by intelligence officials was an unprecedented act in the history of the club that was known as the 'fortress of democracy' where uniformed and armed personnel are not allowed to enter. Journalists present were roughed up when they resisted the plainclothes raiding team that was carrying electronic gadgets, purportedly tracking devices. In the following days, a member of the club, Nasrullah Chaudhry was picked up from his residence. Extensive protest rallies were organized against the illegal detention of Chaudhry. Subsequently, Chaudhry was produced in a court of law on charges of financing a terrorist outfit. Chaudhry was released on bail and the case is pending in court.

The only good news came in April when the Wage Board Commission announced interim relief for journalists and media workers, the first financial relief after 17 long years. Significantly, the Commission attached the condition for media organizations' payment of interim relief with the release of advertisement to complying organizations.

MASS LAY-OFFS

Under recurrent spells of expulsions and closure of newspapers and TV channels, major and minor media houses carried out 'restructuring' due to the so called 'financial crisis'.

Pakistan's flagship media company – the Jang Group – over a period of time laid off over 700 journalist and non-journalist staff including at Geo TV, the largest news channel in Pakistan. In mid-December, the group also closed down its evening newspapers including *Daily Awam*, *Daily News*, *Inqilab* and *Awaz*. The group also shelved its Faisalabad and Peshawar



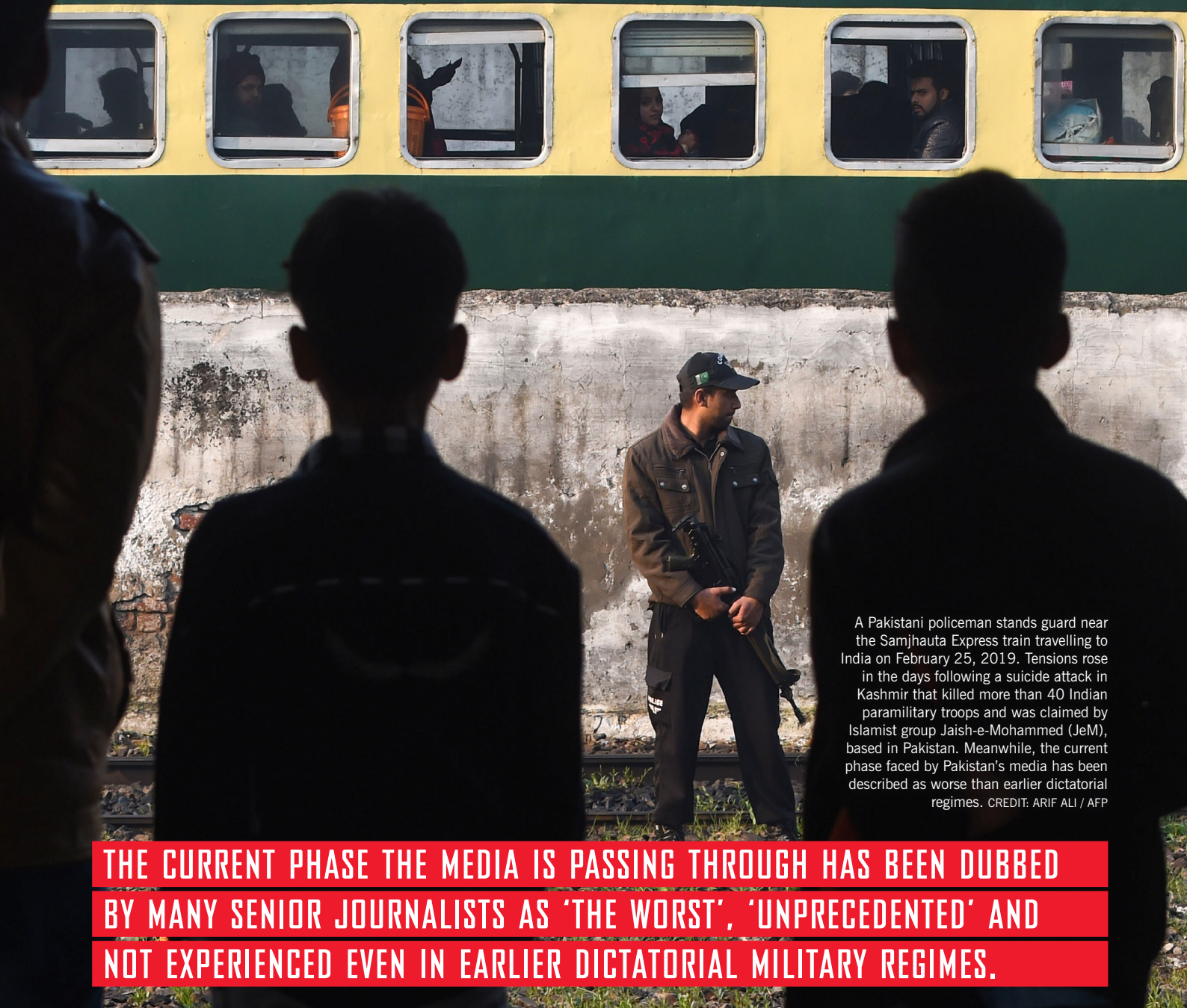
editions of the *Daily Jang*. The management cut down salaries by 10 to 20 percent.

The Nawa-e-Waqt group shut down its television channel Waqt TV, laying off all the staff working at different stations; some 350 employees were rendered jobless. Likewise, the group cut down the newspaper staff by about 150 employees and over a dozen employees faced forced/early retirement. They were not paid their financial dues and had to knock the doors of the courts where matters are progressing at a snail's pace.

The *Century Publications*, one of the largest media houses in the country, fired 243 employees from its different newspapers and TV channels and slashed salaries up to 15 percent. It shut down 10 of its editions and pooled together all editions at its Lahore and Karachi offices.

Dunya TV, another large news channels fired about 200 employees and trimmed the salaries of the surviving staff from

پاکستان ریلوے



A Pakistani policeman stands guard near the Samjhauta Express train travelling to India on February 25, 2019. Tensions rose in the days following a suicide attack in Kashmir that killed more than 40 Indian paramilitary troops and was claimed by Islamist group Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), based in Pakistan. Meanwhile, the current phase faced by Pakistan's media has been described as worse than earlier dictatorial regimes. CREDIT: ARIF ALI / AFP

THE CURRENT PHASE THE MEDIA IS PASSING THROUGH HAS BEEN DUBBED BY MANY SENIOR JOURNALISTS AS 'THE WORST', 'UNPRECEDENTED' AND NOT EXPERIENCED EVEN IN EARLIER DICTATORIAL MILITARY REGIMES.

10 to 20 percent. Dunya TV management also decided to cut down salaries by 10 to 20 percent before it fired some 200 employees all across the country. It also closed down bureaus in many cities and towns in the Sindh and Punjab provinces.

Dawn, the largest, the oldest and most prestigious English daily under Herald Publications, made a drastic cut of 40 percent in salaries, lowering the morale of several of the most professional and committed journalists, who have played a vanguard role in the evolution of a liberal and independent press in Pakistan. The organization also fired some 35 employees, which it hired through 'third party contract', a problematic phenomenon for the journalist community.

Dawn News, the television channel, laid off more than a dozen employees. G-TV, a newly established television channel, fired about 25 employees but the management claimed that their contracts were terminated before the probation period on

the basis of their performance.

Abb Takk TV laid off more than 200 of its employees and carried a pay cut of 20 percent.

Hum TV, another relatively new mainstream news channel fired some 30 of its staff and slashed the salaries from 10 to 40 percent. NewsOne TV channel has been also not paying salaries for four to five months.

National Courier, an English daily was also shut down and over a dozen of its employees were striving to get their financial dues from the management.

Bol TV, which arrived with a bang in 2015 and went on to claim it was the top news channel in the country, proved to be the proverbial nightmare of the Pakistan media industry. Since its launch four years ago, some 4000 to 5000 employees were cyclically hired and fired. Millions of rupees were pending in dues of the thousands of employees. A paltry payment was



The facade of the Rawalpindi office of one of Pakistan's leading dailies, *The News* (English) and *Jang* (Urdu) on June 28, 2018. Facing abductions, censorship and financial ruin, journalists in Pakistan say they are under unprecedented pressure to bend to authorities' will as the country headed to nationwide polls. CREDIT: AAMIR QURESHI / AFP

THE 'ECONOMIC COLLAPSE' OF THE MEDIA HAS HAD A DEEP IMPACT ON WORKING JOURNALISTS IN PAKISTAN. IN ADDITION, TOP NEWS MANAGERS TOO FACED TREMENDOUS PRESSURE, DEALING WITH THE FALL OUT ON THEIR FIELD STAFF.

made in February 2019 by the management on the orders of the Supreme Court of Pakistan. The apex court order has benefited 148 employees so far. Delayed salaries are the hallmark of the channel and about six months' salaries of the staff were due to be paid.

Neo TV did not fire any of its staff but the management got the employees to agree to a salary cut of four days' salary every month.

Another menace that flourished in the past year was delayed payments of salaries by almost all the major and minor television channels and newspapers. Many organizations delayed pay for four months, some even up to six months, for example at the *Daily Ummat*.

DETERIORATING WORKING CONDITIONS

The 'economic collapse' of the media has had a deep impact on working journalists in Pakistan. In addition, top news managers too faced tremendous pressure, dealing with the fall out on their field staff.

In late 2018 Jawad Nazeer, who was serving as news and current affairs director at Geo TV died of heart failure. His colleagues believed that he was under immense pressure because of his own difficult work conditions and those of his colleagues.

The managing director of one of the country's largest television channels survived an anxiety-related heart attack,

related to the stress of his inability to clear salaries of his staff, who were looking up to him for resolving their problems.

Those who were fired have been frantically looking for jobs in the saturated market, but those whose salaries were slashed are faced with the dilemma of downsizing their lifestyles. A journalist who was drawing a decent salary and got one of his sons enrolled in an elite cadet college had to withdraw his son from the college due to uncertainty of salaries. Another journalist likened the dire situation to the dark ages when feudal lords would engage 'bonded labour,' in their fields.

The right of collective bargaining largely remains out of the question as very few organizations have Collective Bargaining Agreements (CBAs). *Jang*, *Nawa-e-Waqt* and *Dawn* newspapers, the legacy of the good old times have CBAs. However, many employees of these organizations believe that most of their elected union leaders were more sympathetic to the owners/management than the employees.

Exploitative working conditions in the absence of CBAs continues unabated. Contractual employment or third-party contractors form a larger part of the employment at media houses. Contractual employment is illegal but the employees, fearful of a protracted legal course, avoid approaching the courts.

Drastic pay cuts were also made by prominent media organizations, demoralizing working journalists, who were braving the hanging sword of retrenchment by their respective organizations.

The severe job security saw the polarized unions of



Pakistan's cricketer-turned politician Imran Khan (C) of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (Movement for Justice) speaks to the media after casting his vote at a polling station during the general election in Islamabad on July 25, 2018. CREDIT: AAMIR QURESHI / AFP

journalists, which had undergone several splits in the past, come together to resist lay-offs and pay cuts which were hampering free media voices. Journalist unions in collaboration with other labour unions launched a spate of sit-ins and protests, but there was no respite.

After a nerve wracking 15 years, on April 10, 2019, the 8th Wage Board Commission announced an interim relief in three slabs ranging from Rs 5000 (USD 35) to Rs 8500 (USD 60) for journalists and other newspapers employees. The last wage commission was announced in 2000 and in 2004. Ever since, journalists were working on salaries fixed on the basis of parameters of inflation set as long back as 2000.

However, amid the dismal scenario of salary cuts and job losses, even this meagre interim raise was good news for working journalists. The Commission has also made it mandatory for the newspapers to pay the interim relief since January else the government advertisement would not be issued to the violating organization.

The key issue is that only few newspapers implement the wage board salaries. The arrears of the sixth wage board were still pending and some 300 to 350 employees were awaiting 19-year old dues. Meanwhile, 9th and 10th wage boards are overdue, posing a question on the government's will to address the plight of journalists.

MASSIVE STATE INTRUSION

Undeclared censorship has been in vogue and created an environment of fear. As a result, self-censorship by television anchors and journalists is rife. TV anchors complained about receiving advisories from security officials on a daily basis. A prominent TV anchor said that 90 percent of the anchors get advisories and merely 10 percent dare to conduct their TV current affairs shows independently.

There were attempts to control content on two prime

television channels Geo TV and Dawn which practice relatively independent journalism with regard to current affairs and politics. These channels on occasion deviate from the official narratives not in accordance with the line of the powerful security establishment of the country.

Talat Hussain, a seasoned journalist who was the host of a current affair programme at Geo TV was fired for being a staunch critic of the civil-military imbalance in the country.

Matiullah Jan, like Hussain, was shown the exit door by his organization Waqt TV for expressing anti-establishment views.

The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) set up a fact-finding mission on the freedom of press in 2018 and observed that there was a massive intrusion by the State apparatus into the distribution of newspapers and broadcast of television channels. Many interviewees requested anonymity and related their experiences of pressure by State and intelligence agencies.

An unofficial ban was witnessed on daily *Dawn*, *The News*, *Jang* and *Nawa-e-Waqt* before the July 2018 general elections of the country. Their distribution was severely hampered in different parts of the country.

The distribution of *Dawn* came to halt at various towns and cities after it published an interview of former prime minister Nawaz Sharif, who raised questions about the militant groups' raison d'être in the country.

Vendors, distributors and cable operators endured threats, physical assault and harassment over supplying copies of *Dawn* in their respective areas or transmission of Geo TV on prime channels.

In the Gilgit-Baltistan province, a chief of a cable operating company was repeatedly harassed and told to bring Geo TV broadcast at the lowest level and was ultimately told to take the channel off air.

Discussing the issues of Balochistan, where insurgents defy the State writ fighting for their rights, is unofficially banned.



Similarly, the rallies and activities of Pashtun nationalists represented by Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) are not shown or covered in the print media.

Likewise, protest rallies of journalists for their rights are completely boycotted by the media save for a few organizations.

KILLINGS, ATTACKS AND ABDUCTION

Noor ul Hassan from Royal News TV was killed and cameraman Sabir was injured on December 3, 2018 in Peshawar in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, northwest Pakistan.

Unidentified gunmen fired shots at Express News TV anchor Imran Khan's house in Lahore, the capital of Punjab Province in north-eastern Pakistan on August 1.

Journalist Muhammad Abid died on August 23 as a result of the injuries he received during the attack on him a day earlier in Borewala Tehsil in Punjab province.

Violent incidents against journalists within a few hours of each other in Lahore highlighted the tough situation for the media ahead of the parliamentary elections. Journalist Asad Kharal was attacked by armed masked men; and Gul Bukhari was abducted and briefly detained by unidentified men in two separate incidents on June 5 night.

Journalist Kadafi Zaman of Norway's TV 2 was arrested and beaten by police while covering a political rally on July 13 in Gujrat city of Punjab province despite informing the police that he was a journalist. He was released on bail on July 16 but faces criminal charges including attempted murder, tearing a police uniform, snatching four mobile telephones from the police, and interference in government function.

The Lahore High Court issued a non-bailable arrest warrant for journalist Cyril Almeida over an interview with former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. He is required to appear at the next hearing of a case seeking action against the former PM on charges of treason.

Illegal picking up and detention of journalists continued in 2018-19. At least three journalists were picked up by security officials, of whom one was released, though he was framed in

Pakistani journalist Cyril Almeida (C) arrives at the High Court to face treason charges in Lahore on October 8, 2018. Two former Pakistani prime ministers and the journalist fronted the case which centred around remarks made by Nawaz Sharif during an interview with the *Dawn* columnist in May 2017, where the former PM suggested Pakistani militants were behind the 2008 Mumbai attacks. CREDIT: ARIF ALI / AFP

terrorism financing activity.

Rizawn Razi was arrested on February 9, in Lahore over a series of social media posts. The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) and the Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists (PFUJ) strongly criticized the arrest and detention of Razi and demand his immediate release. Razi was charged under cyber-crime laws and released on bail.

Law enforcement agencies picked up at least two journalists in Karachi. On April 1, Matloob Husain Mosavi, was abducted from his home. The young reporter was associated with the Jang newspaper. Days after a cameraperson of Abb Takk TV was also picked up in a similar manner. Their official whereabouts are still not known.

SILENCING BY IMPUNITY

Pakistan is known as one of the most dangerous places in the world for journalists and the culture of impunity further magnifies the prevailing threats. From 2008 till 2018 some 128 journalists have been killed across Pakistan, according to Media Matters for Democracy, an Islamabad-based NGO.

The level of impunity for such heinous murders can be gauged by the fact that in only two cases, the murderers faced conviction. Other than the case of Daniel Pearl, a key case was the murder of journalist Wali Babar of Geo TV, who was gunned down in 2011 at busy street of Karachi, allegedly by members of the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM), a Karachi based political party.

Babar's case could have been yet another typical case of impunity, but his elder brother Murtaza made it his mission to get justice. Five judges were changed during the long hearings, several people connected with the case including a lawyer and

A Pakistani journalist reads a local edition of the *International New York Times* in Islamabad on February 12, 2019, which shows a single-column blank space on the front page. An opinion piece in the *International New York Times* criticising Pakistan's powerful army was censored by its local publisher on February 12, replaced by a blank space in a country where it can be dangerous to reprimand the military. The article by Manzoor Pashteen, the leader of a movement which calls for an end what it says are enforced disappearances and extra-judicial murders of ethnic Pashtuns by security officials, was widely available online. CREDIT: AAMIR QURESHI / AFP

SIX OF PAKISTAN'S PROMINENT JOURNALISTS, ALL BASED IN ISLAMABAD, WERE CHARGED UNDER THE PECA AND AN INVESTIGATION WAS LAUNCHED AGAINST THEM. ALL HAVE A REPUTATION OF BEING VOCAL AGAINST VARIOUS KINDS OF WRONGS.

witnesses, were mysteriously gunned down. Finally, in 2015, two of the perpetrators were handed death sentences. It was the selfless personal struggle of Babar's brother that took the case to its logical end. Otherwise, impunity has been a chronic failure by the State, judiciary and the law enforcement agencies to book the culprits.

Impunity abets more killing as the perpetrators remain at large, avoiding prosecution or conviction. Working journalists face threats not only by militants, criminals but also by political, religious and sectarian groups and law enforcement agencies, with no assurance that the perpetrators of violence will be brought to book.

As crimes against journalists continue unabated in Pakistan, most of them keep themselves distant from assignments that could cause them trouble. Investigative journalism has thus been the biggest victim of impunity.

In the backdrop of entrenched impunity, journalists' safety programmes, insurance, training and welfare concepts have been rare in the media industry, though some non-profit organizations are trying to highlight the issue.

TIGHTENING REGULATION

While journalists remained distressed by the economic squeeze and mass unemployment, they also had to face the brunt of laws regulating media freedom.

The draconian Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) passed in 2016, restricts press freedom and needs to be completely revamped, this time after extensive consultations. The controversial law was approved without taking on board the journalist community and other stake holders. Among other things, the Act penalizes the spoken or written word that supposedly poses a danger to the security of Pakistan, to public order or to the maintenance of friendly relations of Pakistan with foreign states.

Six of Pakistan's prominent journalists, all based in Islamabad, were charged under the PECA and an investigation was launched against them. All the six journalists have a reputation of being vocal against various kinds of wrongs. Matiullah Jan, Murtaza Solangi, Azaz Syed, Ammar Masood, Umer Cheema and Ahmed Waqas Goraya were being interrogated by the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA). A case was registered against them on March 13, 2019 charging them with launching a systematic campaign against the visit of Prince Salman of Saudi Arabia, through their Facebook



and Twitter accounts. The journalists were raising the issue of justice for Jamal Khashoggi, the Saudi journalist who was murdered in the Embassy of Saudi Arabia in Turkey.

The FIA registered another case under PECA on April 6, 2019, against Shahzeb Jilani, a senior and vocal journalist, who is a critic of the government as well as of the military's political role. News channel 24 was taken off air in early April by PEMRA over a report by Najam Sethi, a seasoned journalist and former editor of *Daily Times*, about Prime Minister Khan's alleged differences with his wife. The news, if it were inaccurate, could have been rebutted, but the regulator's action was a clear message to the media to refrain from any criticism of the government.

With the PECA already restricting freedom of the press and expression, the PTI government is flexing its muscles to heighten regulation of the media. The government in February 2019 proposed the creation of a new regulatory body, the Pakistan Media Regulatory Authority (PMRA). Under the proposed law all media including print, electronic, and social media would be monitored and regulated by this new body. After reviewing the role of existing regulatory bodies, the government decided to replace them in favour of a single regulatory body, the PMRA. The proposed body would replace the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA), Newspapers Employees Act (1973), that largely governs the print media and guarantees minimum wages and service conditions, as well as the Pakistan Press Council (PPC).

The proposed law is a matter of much concern for journalists, as it might heighten their vulnerability to the ever-present intimidation by the government and state institutions. The PFUJ and Karachi Union of Journalists rejected the PMRA, calling it a brazen attack on the freedom of press, speech and expression.

The media in Pakistan is growing by leaps and bounds, providing a variety of news, social and entertainment to diverse audiences. However, this mushrooming growth will remain meaningless if regulatory laws are framed with a focus on curbing free access to information and freedom of expression.