



MEDIA AND PRESS FREEDOM IN PAKISTAN 2020
Annual report by Pakistan Press Foundation
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Address: Press Centre, Shahrah Kamal Ataturk, Karachi, Pakistan

Website: www.pakistanpressfoundation.org

Email: ppf@pakistanpressfoundation.org

Twitter: [@Pakistan_Press](https://twitter.com/Pakistan_Press)

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Executive Summary

In 2020 Pakistani media was confronted with the unique new challenges both in terms of content to cover as well as in the nature of the measures to restrict press freedom and the free flow of information in the country. The year presented the media with the challenge of covering the spread of COVID-19 while also ensuring the safety of media workers.

According to the annual report on press freedom produced by Pakistan Press Foundation, 2020 also saw more aggressive forms of censorship being enforced in the country. Social media content became increasingly subject to policing with the development of policies to regulate content as well as with the registration of cases against media workers for their posts on social media. Alongside this, press freedom continued to be threatened with journalists being abducted, killed, arrested, and manhandled with impunity. Women journalists were subjected to threats and harassment online highlighting the gendered nature of attacks on press freedom.

In 2020, with the spread of COVID-19 claimed the lives of many media workers in Pakistan and infected numerous others. It presented a challenge for newsrooms in terms of implementing the required standard operating procedures to ensure the safety of their staff, often at the frontlines in covering the spread of the virus. In terms of coverage of developments regarding COVID-19, journalists had to work with data regarding the spread of the virus as well as work within the guidelines of coverage that had been developed by government authorities. There were instances of journalists being arrested for their coverage of a quarantine centre.

While the coronavirus was a new frontier that the media had to deal with in 2020, in many other ways the challenges faced by the Pakistani media and the restrictions on press freedom have not changed. In one instance a journalist was killed during the year. In other instances, journalists continue to be arrested, injured and manhandled.

On February 16, *KTN* news and daily *Kawish* journalist Aziz Memon's body was recovered. A joint investigation team regarding his death in May said it was a "well planned murder".

During the year, in perhaps the most high-profile arrest of a media worker, *Jang* and *Geo Media Group* Editor in Chief Mir Shakilur Rehman was arrested by the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) in March. He was later shifted to jail. Eight months later, in November, Rehman was finally granted bail.

In 2020, a sense of fear and insecurity amongst the media grew with at least two reported instances of journalists being picked up and disappeared for multiple hours. Senior journalist Matiullah Jan was abducted from Islamabad in July in October, *Geo News* senior reporter Ali Imran Syed went missing.

When journalists were not physically harmed, they were threatened. Following a story regarding the business assets of Lieutenant General (Retired) Asim Saleem Bajwa, investigative journalist Ahmad Noorani received life threats. In other instances, a publishing house as well as the Karachi Press Club were raided, further creating a sense of fear.

2020 also saw increased policing of content on social media with rules developed to control content that can be shared on these platforms. The temporary ban on video sharing application, Tik Tok, was a demonstration of this shrinking space for free expression on social media, which is generally considered to be a more open and accessible source of content sharing. In November, social media rules were notified thus further reducing the space for criticism, debate and discussion online.

The media felt the impact of this policing of social media with criminal complaints registered against media personnel for social media posts that were considered to be objectionable due to their criticism of the state. Criminal complaints were registered against former Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) chairman Absar Alam, *Express Tribune* News Editor Bilal Farooqi and journalist Asad Ali Toor.

On the broadcast media front, this year PEMRA provided numerous directives that made it impossible for news outlets to present a complete story to their viewers. By blocking entire sections of coverage such as the ban on speeches by absconders, news outlets are unable to cover current events taking place in the country.

During 2020, the media in Pakistan has come under attack on all fronts — from adapting to the challenge of covering the pandemic to working within an increasingly restrictive space for free expression and press freedom.

The safety of the media has come under threat and as the space for free expression shrinks, both online and in traditional media, journalists are forced to adapt to this environment. The lack of accountability for crimes against the media, the new fronts of creating rules for monitoring content and the aggressive methods of silencing dissent, create an environment of fear and censorship.

TIMELINE

January:

- 6th January-** Writer Mohammed Hanif says his Urdu publisher's office was [raided](#)
- 16th January-** ARY News anchor Kashif Abbasi [banned](#) for 60 days
- 17th January-** Channel Five and Khabrain journalist [Azharul Haq Wahid](#) arrested by FIA
- 18th January-** Lahore court grants FIA [physical remand](#) of Azharul Haq Wahid
- 25th January-** Shahzeb Khanzada and Waseem Badami sent defamation notices by Jehangir Tareen
- 28th January-** Federal cabinet [approves](#) Citizens Protection (Against Online Harm) Rules, 2020
- 29th January-** Lahore court [rejects](#) Azharul Haq Wahid's bail plea

February:

- 8th February-** Vsh News reporter Sajjad Noor and cameraperson Rehan Bizenjo injured in knife attack in Pasni, Balochistan
- 11th February-** Approval of social media rules by cabinet [reported](#)
Geo News reporter Asif Ali Bhatti [received](#) threatening calls from Afghanistan
- 16th February-** KTN journalist Aziz Memon's body [recovered](#)
- 28th February-** Committee [formed](#) by Ministry of Information Technology to review social media rules

March:

- 6th March-** PEMRA issues [advisory](#) on coverage of Aurat March
- 12th March-** Jang and Geo Media Group Editor in Chief Mir Shakilur Rehman [arrested](#) by NAB

April:

- 7th April-** PEMRA [issues](#) DawnNewsTV show cause notice for incorrect news regarding death of British prime minister
- 10th April-** [DNA report](#) of Aziz Memon issued
- 27th April-** APP journalist Zafar Rasheed Bhatti [dies](#) of COVID-19
- 28th April-** Mir Shakilur Rehman [sent](#) to jail

May:

- 6th May-** PEMRA [suspends](#) licence for NEO TV
- 28th May-** Senior journalist Fakhruddin Syed [dies](#) of COVID-19
Radio Pakistan Urdu newscaster Huma Zafar [dies](#) of COVID-19
Radio Pakistan broadcast engineer Muhammad Ashfaq [dies](#) of COVID-19
- 29th May-** JIT [announces](#) conclusion of Aziz Memon's case

June:

20th June- *Samaa TV* journalist Saeed Ali Achakzai and Khyber News TV journalist Mateen Achakzai [arrested and beaten](#) in Chaman

25th June- Senior journalist AT Nizami [dies](#) of COVID-19

PEMRA [issues](#) directive for reporting and coverage of COVID-19

July:

3rd July- PEMRA [suspends](#) licence for *24 News HD*

6th July- Lahore High Court [suspends ban](#) on *24 News HD*

21st July- Senior journalist Matiullah Jan [abducted](#) from Islamabad

23rd July- Punjab [bans](#) 100 books being taught in private schools

August:

30th August- PBC, HRCP and PFUJ issue joint statement on [threats](#) to investigative journalist Ahmad Noorani

PEMRA [suspends](#) *24 News HD* licence

September:

9th September- FIR [registered](#) against *Express Tribune* journalist Bilal Farooqi

11th September- FIR [registered](#) against former PEMRA Chairman Absar Alam

Bilal Farooqi [picked up](#) by police from his residence in Karachi

12th September- FIR [registered](#) against Asad Ali Toor

14th September- *Geo News* and *Daily Jang* journalist Hanif Zai [dies](#) of COVID-19

15th September- Report of senior journalist Suhail Warraich's book being [removed](#) from book stalls

16th September- IHC [grants](#) Asad Ali Toor protective bail

23rd September- *Channel 24* reporter Ehtisham Kiyani [arrested](#) by Islamabad police

October:

1st October- PEMRA [bans](#) coverage of absconders

2nd October- PEMRA [bans](#) coverage of Lahore motorway rape case

9th October- PTA [bans](#) Tik Tok

18th October- *Samaa TV* reporter Sanjay Sadhwani [manhandled](#) at Karachi rally for Pakistan Democratic Movement

19th October- PTA [restores](#) Tik Tok

22nd October- Suhail Warraich [shares](#) new book cover

24th October- *Geo News* senior reporter Ali Imran Syed [returns](#) after missing for over 22 hours

28th October- Supreme Court [rejects](#) report by Islamabad police chief regarding Matiullah Jan's kidnapping

November:

9th November- Mir Shakilur Rehman [granted bail](#) by Supreme Court

14th November- *Geo TV* journalist Arshad Waheed Chaudhry [dies](#) of COVID-19

17th November- LHC's Rawalpindi bench [says](#) FIR against Asad Ali Toor "infructuous"

18th November- Information technology ministry [notifies](#) Removal and Blocking of Unlawful Online Content (Procedure, Oversight and Safeguards) Rules 2020

19th November- IHC takes up [petition](#) against PEMRA's ban on coverage of absconders

December:

17th December- Senior journalist Tariq Mahmood Malik [dies](#) of COVID-19

18th December- PFUJ petition against Removal and Blocking of Unlawful Online Content (Procedure, Oversight and Safeguards) Rules 2020 [admitted](#) for regular hearing at IHC

Section 1: Grappling with COVID-19

This year presented a unique challenge for countries around the world with the spread of COVID-19. As the world grappled with the pandemic, Pakistan too had to handle the health, economic as well as social impact of the spread of the virus. To date, the virus has claimed over 10,000 lives in the country and over 477,000 have been infected in Pakistan.

The pandemic has forced businesses including the media industry to adapt to the challenges that the virus created including the implementation of standard operating procedures (SOPs) such as encouraging social distancing and mask wearing, shifting to work from home or shift based office setups, and most importantly providing employees, particularly media personnel often on the frontlines, with the necessary personal protective equipment (PPE).

Media workers are often at the frontlines and therefore are even more exposed to the virus than others. In Pakistan, the media has covered not only developments regarding the pandemic itself but also other large scale events such as the ongoing rallies by opposition political parties, religious gatherings and other such events, where they are at a higher risk of exposure. It is incumbent upon both media houses as well as the government to devise and follow a strategy to ensure that media workers are operating in the safest possible manner in the midst of the pandemic.

According to a report by the Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists (PFUJ) in May, 156 media persons had contracted the virus. Since then, many more journalists, anchors and media personnel have been reported to have tested positive for the virus.

So far at least eight media persons have lost their lives due to the pandemic and many more have contracted the virus.

8 media persons die due to COVID-19

In the first reported instance of a media person's death due to COVID-19, senior journalist Zafar Rasheed Bhatti, who had served as the English desk head at the *Associated Press of Pakistan (APP)* and was the former president of the APP employees union, passed away on April 27. Quoting a press release issued by APP, *Dawn* [reported](#) that Bhatti, 70, had attended a Tableeghi Jamaat during which he was believed to have contracted the virus.

In May, three journalists were reported to have died due to the coronavirus. *Radio Pakistan* senior broadcast engineer Muhammad Ashfaq, 48, and Urdu newscaster Huma Zafar, 52 were amongst the three deaths [reported](#). Senior journalist Fakhruddin Syed, who was working for *92 News*, [passed away](#) at the Hayatabad Medical Complex in Peshawar on May 28.

A month later, on June 25, senior journalist AT Nizami passed away at the age of 88 in Karachi. According to [Dawn](#), Nizami, who had served as city editor of daily *Hurriyat*, was in self isolation at his home but his condition deteriorated.

On September 14, a journalist associated with *Geo News* and *Daily Jang*, Mohammad Hanif Zai, 48, passed away in Karachi. He was admitted to the Indus Hospital, and had been referred to Karachi after his condition worsened while being treated in Badin, [Samaa TV reported](#).

Two months later, on November 14, senior journalist Arshad Waheed Chaudhry passed away due to COVID-19 at the Holy Family Hospital in Rawalpindi, where he had been placed on a ventilator after his condition deteriorated, [Dawn reported](#). Host of the *Geo TV* show *Geo Parliament*, columnist for *Daily Jang* and vice president of the National Press Club, Chaudhry was in his late forties at the time of his death.

On December 17, another senior journalist, Tariq Mahmood Malik, lost his life to the virus. According to [Samaa TV](#), Mahmood covered foreign affairs and worked for various news organisations including *Ary News*, *Neo TV*, *Samaa TV* and *Hum News*. He died of a lung infection in Islamabad.

Covering the coronavirus

Beyond ensuring the protection of media workers from the virus itself, the coronavirus also created a new challenge for the media in terms of how to cover the pandemic.

As a health crisis with daily fluctuations and developments, journalists were required to work with data provided by the government and often had to deal with data being changed, missing or being shared at a delayed pace. It also required the media to rely increasingly on social media outlets where various government officials were providing updates pertaining to the pandemic in their specific areas.

On World Press Freedom Day, Pakistan Press Foundation released an [annual report](#) focussing on the impact of the coronavirus on media in the country. This report details the impact of the pandemic in terms of coverage, data collection as well as the challenges to collection of accurate information that was faced by journalists in Pakistan. It also provides a list of recommendations for media houses and the government in order to ensure the safety of journalists covering COVID-19.

Journalists arrested for coverage of quarantine centre

On June 20, [two journalists](#) — Saeed Ali Achakzai of *Samaa News TV* and Mateen Achakzai of *Khyber News TV* — based in the border city of Chaman in the Balochistan province were arrested and brutally beaten by security personnel because of their coverage of poor conditions in the local coronavirus quarantine centre.

The two journalists were arrested by district administration under the Maintenance of Public Order Act and shifted to jail. They were released after three days and an investigation was initiated into the incident by the provincial government.

Balochistan Home Minister Zia Langove referred to it as a “brutal incident” and said that three officials directly involved in it had been suspended. Furthermore, the case against the journalists had been dropped.

Section 2: A crackdown on social media

During the past year, there has been an increased policing of content shared on social media platforms and indicates a growing concern amongst authorities about the open nature of these platforms. Social media applications can act as both an extension as well as an alternative to the mainstream media. However, there is now an increasing push for monitoring content shared on these platforms. In 2020, through the registration of cases, the approval of a set of rules and through a ban on one such platform, the space for free expression on social media has been limited.

In November, the government notified rules for content shared on social media platforms. These rules will act as both ways of taking legal action against individuals sharing certain content but also can result in self-censorship.

Social media platforms offer an alternative and growing space for expression. However, they have also become tools for the dissemination of threats, harassment and smear campaigns.

In 2020, numerous campaigns have been created specifically targeting journalists. The government, too, has participated and initiated such trends that target certain journalists considered to be critical of the state. Women journalists have been the specific target of these attacks.

The spread of the coronavirus has also brought social media platforms into focus — both for the resource they can provide in the dissemination of information as well as for becoming hotbeds for the recirculation of fake news and misinformation.

Social Media Rules

During this year, the government approved rules to regulate social media platforms in the country.

On February 11, it was reported that the government approved rules to regulate social media in Pakistan. These rules would grant the government a large degree of control over social media companies in terms of access to users' data and in policing the content being shared.

Speaking to *Dawn*, Information Technology Secretary Shoaib Ahmad had [said](#) that the federal cabinet had approved the rules on January 28. He said that they were subordinate legislation under the Pakistan Telecommunications Act, 1996 and Pakistan Electronic Crimes Act, 2016.

According to [Reuters](#), social media companies would need to “help law enforcement agencies access data and remove online content deemed unlawful” and these companies would be given 24 hours “to respond to a request to remove unlawful material” and in emergency cases they would be given six hours.

They would also need to provide “subscriber information, traffic data, content data and any other information or data that is sought” as required.

Perhaps, the most draconian of regulations, as per the rules, “the interpretations of the regulations by the authorities in Pakistan shall take precedence over any community standards or rules or community guidelines or policies or any other instruments devised by a social media company”.

According to *Reuters*, if they do not follow the rules, the social media companies “risk being blocked online”.

The policy received backlash after which it was reported that Prime Minister Imran Khan would take all stakeholders on board before implementing the rules. Petitions against the policy were also submitted in courts including the Islamabad High Court and the Lahore High Court.

In response to the regulations, the social media companies including Facebook, Google and Twitter threatened to leave the country, *New York Times* reported.

On February 28, a committee was [formed](#) by the Ministry of Information Technology and Telecommunication to review the rules.

As of March, the implementation of the Citizens Protection (Against Online Harm) Rules 2020 had been suspended.

On November 18, the information technology ministry notified the “Removal and Blocking of Unlawful Online Content (Procedure, Oversight and Safeguards) Rules 2020”. According to *Dawn*, the Internet Service Providers of Pakistan (ISPAK) [rejected](#) the rules.

Additionally, the Asia Internet Coalition (AIC) wrote a letter to Prime Minister Imran Khan for assistance in making changes to the rules, which as per *Dawn*, “have made it extremely difficult for social media firms to continue their platforms and services in Pakistan”.

Civil society organisation Bolo Bhi has conducted an [analysis](#) of the new rules and provided a comparison of these in comparison to the earlier ones approved by the cabinet.

The Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists (PFUJ) had petitioned the Islamabad High Court (IHC) against the rules which IHC Chief Justice Athar Minallah admitted for regular hearings on December 18, *Dawn* reported.

These rules and their approval by the government are likely to have a chilling effect on free expression on social media platforms as users fear sharing of their information and data. It is a drastic step taken by the government, in order to limit the space available online to share opinions. In addition to potentially reducing access to social media platforms in Pakistan, it is

likely to lead to growing self-censorship online.

Tik Tok Banned

On October 9, PTA banned Tik Tok due to “immoral/indecent content” shared on the platform.

In a statement shared on Twitter, PTA said that the move had come in light of a “number of complaints from different segments of the society against immoral/indecent content” on the video sharing application.

PTA said that they had issued a final notice to Tik Tok and gave them “considerable time” to respond and comply with the instructions for “development of effective mechanism for proactive moderation of unlawful online content”. The statement added that Tik Tok failed to comply with the instructions and directions to block the app were issued.

Ten days later, on October 19, the PTA “conditionally restored” the app.

In a [statement](#) shared on Twitter, PTA said that the restoration of Tik Tok was “strictly subject to the condition that the platform will not be used for spread of vulgarity/indecent content & societal values will not be abused”. The telecommunication authority added that they would “be constrained” to permanently block the application if the condition was not fulfilled.

Cases registered against journalists

During 2020, a common trend observed was the registration of cases against journalists and media professionals. Many of these criminal complaints shared similar sections of various laws and were registered with regards to social media posts by the journalists. This reflects a growing policing of free speech online and an added concern for journalists with regards to what they share on social media platforms such as Twitter.

Bilal Farooqi

Express Tribune News Editor Bilal Farooqi was picked up on September 11 from outside his home in Karachi on the basis of a criminal complaint that was registered against him on September 9. According to the First Information Report (FIR), the case against the journalist was registered under Section 500 (punishment for defamation) and 505 (statements conducing to public mischief) of the Pakistan Penal Code (PPC) and Section 11 (hate speech) and 20 (offences against dignity of a natural person) of PECA, 2016.

According to *Dawn*, the complainant of the FIR, Javed Khan said he checked his Facebook and Twitter accounts and found highly objectionable material shared by Farooqi on the two platforms that were “highly provocative posts” against the Pakistan Army and also material concerning religious hatred. The complainant said that Farooqi had “defamed” the army and such posts “may be used by hostile elements for their nefarious designs”.

During the first hearing of Farooqi's case, the investigating officer said that Section 500 and 505 of the PPC had been inserted in the FIR by mistake and they had been removed.

Absar Alam

On September 11, a criminal complaint was registered against former PEMRA Chairman Absar Alam in the city of Jhelum in the Punjab province.

The criminal complaint against Alam was registered on the application of a lawyer, Khursheed Alam, who stated that "Absar Alam on his Twitter account has used derogatory language against state institutions and personalities". The criminal complaint said the tweets were seditious and that the journalist should be charged with High Treason.

Asad Ali Toor

Just a day after a case was registered against Absar Alam, a third criminal complaint was registered against a journalist.

On September 12, an FIR was registered against journalist [Asad Ali Toor](#) for "posting negative propaganda against the state, Pakistani institutions and the Pakistan Army on his social media account," *Dawn* reported.

The FIR against Toor was registered under Sections 499 (defamation), 500 (punishment for defamation) and 505 (statements conducing to public mischief) of the PPC and Sections 37 (unlawful online content), 20 (offences against dignity of a natural person) and 11 (hate speech) of PECA.

The case was registered by a resident of Rawalpindi, Hafiz Ehtesham Ahmed who alleged that the journalist had "used derogatory language for high-level government institutions, including the Pakistan Army which is a grave crime according to the law".

On September 16, the Islamabad High Court [granted](#) Toor protective bail in the case registered against him by the Cyber Crime Wing of the FIA. On November 17, the Lahore High Court's Rawalpindi bench said that the FIR against him was "infructuous", *Dawn* [reported](#).

Trends, campaigns and harassment on social media

Social media has become an important platform for the dissemination of information, speedy updates as well as a way of staying up to date with vital information being shared by the government, opposition and others in positions of power, as well as by various ministries. However, this platform particularly Twitter has also led to campaigns online against journalists and the media. The use of hashtags against specific journalists and tweets by the government singling out certain anchorpersons and media persons, has led to the online trolling and harassment of the media.

On December 2, the ruling Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf's (PTI) Lahore account [tweeted](#) two lists of media persons — one list that they said was of what was described as “anchors/media men building narratives for the corrupt” and the second list which was of what was described as “brave and bold journalists fighting the war of truth and justice”.

The lists tweeted by PTI Official Lahore were deleted. According to the head of the party's Twitter team Jibran Ilyas, this was a mistake and he apologised, *SamaaTV* [reported](#). He said that operators from the regional account had made the list and shared it, adding that it had not been shared from the party's main account.

The tweet had also included the hashtag 'HardTalkNotCapitalTalk'. This was a hashtag that emerged in Pakistan following an [interview](#) of former finance minister Ishaq Dar on *BBC's* HardTalk. The trend compared the *BBC* show to senior Pakistani journalist Hamid Mir's show Capital Talk on *Geo*. Such trends are not the first of their kind. In July 2019, '#ArrestAntiPakJournalists' was the top Twitter trend in the country. Alongside trends, the active participation of the ruling party in such trends act as tools to troll the media and act as ways of labelling journalists as being anti-state or by categorizing them into good or bad journalists, thus undermining their credibility. Instead of allowing the media to operate freely, the government is participating in campaigns online that are the sources of threats, abuse and harassment of the media.

Women journalists targeted online

Women journalists in particular have been subject to abuse and threats online highlighting the circumstances that they have to work within.

On August 12, women journalists [issued](#) a joint statement drawing attention to the “vicious attacks through social media” that were being directed at women journalists and commentators in the country. They said that these acts were making it “incredibly difficult” for them to carry out their professional duties.

“The target of these attacks are women with differing viewpoints and those whose reports have been critical of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf's government and more specifically its handling of the coronavirus pandemic,” the joint statement read, adding: “The online attacks are instigated by government officials and then amplified by a large number of Twitter accounts, which declare their affiliation to the ruling party.”

In their joint statement, the women journalists and analysts said that via a “well-defined and coordinated campaign”, their personal details were being publicised. They were being referred to as “peddlers of 'fake news', 'enemy of the people' and accused of taking bribes (often termed as 'paid' journalists or lifafas”. Additionally, in some cases, their pictures and videos were being morphed. They said that women in the Pakistani media were not only being targeted for their work but also their gender. Their social media timelines are “being barraged” with gender-based slurs, threats of sexual and physical violence. They also drew attention to attempts to hack their social media accounts.

The statement issued by women journalists drew attention to the gendered attacks on press freedom that exist in the country.

Section 3: An overactive regulatory body controls broadcast media

During the year, the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) stepped in to ban content on numerous occasions. While PEMRA has the authority to monitor, regulate and oversee content being shared on broadcast media, steps taken during 2020, made it difficult for media organisations to cover events and provide the public with unfiltered information.

Absconders' speeches banned

On October 1, PEMRA [prohibited](#) the broadcast and rebroadcast of any speech, interview or public address of an absconder or a proclaimed offender on TV channels.

The step was widely believed to be an attempt to deny airtime to Nawaz Sharif, a former prime minister and leader of the opposition Pakistan Muslim League (PML-N) political party. The

According to *Dawn*, PEMRA referred to its own directives from October 2019 saying that they had “directed all satellite television channel licensees to form an in-house committee to ensure compliance with the Electronic Media Code of Conduct 2015”. Additionally, PEMRA referenced various Supreme Court decisions in 2016 and 2019.

Following this, the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) along with 15 other journalists, anchors and analysts (some of whom later withdrew their names from the petition) challenged PEMRA's order in a petition submitted to the Islamabad High Court (IHC).

On November 19, IHC Chief Justice Athar Minallah took up the petition and said the court couldn't grant relief to an absconder, *Dawn* [reported](#).

Biscuit advertisements

On October 5, the regulatory body issued a directive urging broadcasters and advertisers to refrain from “using themes and content which do not correspond with the nature of the product being advertised,” *Dawn* [reported](#).

As per the report, the directive came following a Gala biscuit advertisement featuring actress Mehwish Hayat, which people had criticised on social media.

The directive said that the “content being aired on TV channels was not corresponding with the nature of the product”.

Motorway rape coverage banned

On October 2, PEMRA issued another directive, this time [prohibiting](#) media coverage of the Sialkot motorway gang-rape, more commonly referred to as the Lahore motorway rape case, where a woman

was gang-raped in front of her children in the outskirts of Lahore leading to outrage and protests by citizens.

In its directive, the media regulatory body quoted an order by an administrative judge of the Anti-Terrorism Court in Lahore which stated: “In the instant case one of the accused has been shifted to the judicial lock up for the purpose of identification parade and if media coverage of the instant case is not stopped it will certainly be diminished the evidentiary worth of the material collected by the prosecution”.

The order quoted added that it was an offence related to sex and due to media coverage the victim and their family would be “disgraced”. The order requested PEMRA to stop coverage of the case on electronic, print and social media. In light of this, PEMRA directed all satellite TV channels to comply with the order and refrain from any content regarding the case.

Directives for coverage of COVID-19

On June 25, PEMRA introduced a set of [restrictive directives](#) for reporting and coverage of COVID-19 by television channels.

The restrictions imposed in the directives include “any violence at hospitals, emergency situation, attack, offensive behavior towards healthcare workers may not be telecast in order to protect honor and dignity of healthcare workers as the same may demoralize them”.

PEMRA directives also state the media should avoid “showing images and videos of public interference in their [healthcare workers] line of duty while performing sacred work of saving lives of Pakistani brethren fallen ill to COVID-19.”

Framed in vague terms the directives stated: “No information should be aired which tantamount to character assassination of frontline healthcare workers.”

The directive also urged media houses to develop their capacity to cover the pandemic by constituting special editorial boards to verify the authenticity, accuracy and correctness of information regarding any drug, vaccine or other treatment through the drug regulatory authority and federal and provincial health ministers. They also said that only qualified and registered healthcare professionals working on the pandemic should be provided with airtime for expert opinion.

PEMRA also stated that media houses should avoid airing projections regarding the virus which are not based on ground realities and stoke unnecessary panic.

These directives were in addition to advice issued earlier on the pandemic as well as issued in the Electronic Media (Programme and Advertisement) Code of Conduct 2015.

Women's march coverage

In an advisory regarding the annual Women's Day march, the Aurat March held on March 8, PEMRA "warned TV channels against airing "unethical slogans, play cards with objectionable content," [Dawn reported](#).

Proposal to regulate online content

In January, PEMRA proposed regulations of web TV and over-the-top (OTT) content services. According to [Dawn](#), 19 organisations and 36 prominent individuals rejected this proposal.

Fines and bans by PEMRA

In January, *ARY News* anchor Kashif Abbasi was banned for 60 days after a federal minister pulled out a boot (presumably as a symbol of the military) and placed it on the table during a broadcast of Abbasi's show. According to *The News*, Abbasi was banned for "acting unprofessionally" and "not intervening" when the Faisal Vawda had placed the boot on the table.

In February, PEMRA fined *Channel 92* Rs1 million for airing defamatory content against the prime minister's special assistant Zulikfar Bukari in October of the previous year, *Dawn* reported.

DawnNewsTV ran the news that UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson had passed away due to the coronavirus and based this on a fake update by the *BBC World Service*. This, however, turned out to be false as a result of which PEMRA [issued](#) a show cause notice to the channel on April 7.

Channels blocked by PEMRA

***Channel 24* suspended**

On July 3, PEMRA [suspended](#) the licence for *Channel 24 News HD* for "illegal transmission of news and current affairs content," *Dawn* reported. On July 7, the Lahore High Court had suspended this order, according to [The News](#).

The next month, on August 30, PEMRA once again suspended the channel's licence, this time for "airing hating inciting content" during a Muharram transmission, *Dawn* [reported](#).

***NEO TV* suspended**

In May, *NEO TV* also saw its licence suspended by the regulatory authority. According to [Dawn](#), this was done "after the expiry of the show-cause notice period as the transmissions by the channel were found to be illegal".

Section 4: Censorship of content — Books removed, offices raided

During 2020, blatant attempts to censor content being published have been witnessed in Pakistan. These range from measures such as removal and bans on books considered to be objectionable to regulations via the relevant authorities to raids on publishing houses. Both measures have limited the ability for free expression and acted as a muzzle on free speech. In one episode during 2020, the Karachi Press Club was also entered by authorities without prior permission from the club. Meanwhile, the Punjab Assembly passed a Bill that would allow inspections of printing presses and the confiscation of books.

Suhail Warraich's book removed

On September 15 it was reported that a book published by senior journalist [Suhail Warraich](#) was removed from book stalls within hours of its arrival. The book, 'Yeh Company Nahi Chaley Gi' (which translates to: 'This company will not work'), is a compilation of Warraich's columns already published in daily *Jang* and on *BBC Urdu*.

The controversial book cover featured a cartoon showing Chief of Army Staff General Qamar Javed Bajwa sitting on a chair and Prime Minister Khan playing on the floor beside him with a ball and a doll. On one side of the cover, leading opposition leaders — former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, former President Asif Ali Zardari, Pakistan People's Party Chairperson Bilawal Bhutto Zardari and Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz Vice President Maryam Nawaz — peering in from the window.

Speaking to *BBC Urdu*, Warraich said that the content of the book is previously published columns. He said that he found that "some circles" have objected to the book's title page. "Yesterday, I was also contacted and told that the cartoon on the title page undermines the dignity of the prime minister," he said.

Warraich said that he did not think that there was anything objectionable in the cartoon on the title page of the book. He said that cartoons are made in a "light mood" and they are always seen in a "light manner". "But despite this, late at night, on the insistence of a lot of my friends and groups, we removed it from Twitter." He added that they would change the title page of the book.

On October 22, Warraich tweeted a picture of the new book cover.

Textbooks banned

On July 23, the Punjab province [banned 100 books](#) that were being taught in private schools for carrying "blasphemous and anti-Pakistan content".

The step was taken by the Punjab Curriculum and Textbook Board (PCTB) Managing Director Rai Manzoor Hussain Nasir.

According to *The News*, Nasir said that the PCTB was reviewing 10,000 books being taught in private schools across Punjab. He said the first phase of banning 100 books included books published by 31 publishers which included Oxford and Cambridge for “blasphemous, immoral and anti-Pakistan content”.

As per Nasir, the books that were banned had “distorted facts about Pakistan and its creation, Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah [founder of Pakistan], Allama Muhammad Iqbal while these books also carried blasphemous content”.

Additionally, Nasir said that the banned books were portraying Pakistan as an “inferior country to India” and in Azad Jammu and Kashmir was shown as part of India in maps in some of the books.

Citing examples of what was included in the banned books, Nasir said that one book on Mathematics explained counting to students using pictures of pigs. Another book published by Cambridge “tried to promote crime and violence among the students on the basis of unemployment in the country”.

Publishing house raided

On January 6, Pakistani writer Mohammed Hanif said that “some people claiming to be from the ISI [Inter Services Intelligence]” had “barged into” the offices of his Urdu publisher Maktaba Daniyal and confiscated copies of the Urdu translation for his book, *A Case of Exploding Mangoes*.

In a second tweet, Hanif added that a week before this incident they had received a defamation notice from former military dictator General Ziaul Haq’s son. The raid was “deplored” by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, *Dawn* reported.

Karachi Press Club entered without permission

On July 27, Pakistan Rangers entered into the [Karachi Press Club \(KPC\)](#) without permission of the club.

According to KPC Secretary Arman Sabir, Rangers personnel entered the KPC “without informing them and conducted some security rehearsal there.”

A press release issued by KPC Governing Body said that the “sanctity of the club had been trampled” and demanded the Director General Rangers to take immediate action against the personnel responsible for this action.

Section 5: Threats and physical attacks on media workers

The media in Pakistan continued to face physical attacks including manhandling, injuries and in some instances death. During the year, a repeat occurrence was the disappearance of journalists. In other instances, media persons faced arrests and were threatened in connection to their work.

Physical attacks and threats to the media are not a new development in the country, they continue to plague the media landscape. In Pakistan, the basic safety of a media worker's life is not protected and this creates an environment of fear within which journalists have to work. While such acts of intimidation and violence against the media continue in Pakistan, the perpetrators enjoy impunity for their actions.

Journalists killed

During this year, PPF has confirmed one case of a murder of a journalist which appeared to be in connection to his work.

Aziz Memon

On February 16, the body of a journalist associated with *KTN* news channel and Sindhi-language daily *Kawish*, Aziz Memon, was found in a water channel in Mehrabpur in Naushahro Firoze district in Sindh.

Quoting sources, *Dawn* [reported](#) that Memon had asked a cameraman he worked with to drop him at a location where he was to attend a ceremony. Villagers had later spotted his body in the canal.

According to the report, the journalist had “often received threats of dire consequences during his 30-year-long career”. One such threat was from a Member of the National Assembly, after which he left his hometown and moved to Islamabad for a while.

According to reports about a year before his death, the journalist had released a video in which he said that officials from the ruling party in Sindh province, Pakistan People’s Party (PPP), along with local police had threatened him for his reporting. Memon’s report had included the allegation that people were paid to attend the PPP chairperson Bilawal Bhutto Zardari’s train March.

In the wake of Memon’s death, federal minister Fawad Chaudhry had requested the Chief Justice of Pakistan to “take notice of the mysterious death” of the journalist. Meanwhile, Bilawal had also condemned the murder and added that journalists should work with their allies, *Dawn* reported.

Following Memon’s death, a joint investigation team (JIT) was set up by the provincial government.

In April, Memon's DNA report was [released](#), which according to *Dawn*, had "found traces of some other human DNA". A meeting of the JIT, however, said that this did not prove that he was murdered.

A month later, on May 30, *Dawn* [reported](#) that the JIT had reached its final conclusion that the case was a "well planned murder". Three suspects had been arrested earlier, however, the prime suspect, Mushtaq Setho, and four other individuals alleged to be accomplices were still at large.

Physical assault of media workers

During the year, PPF has recorded at least two instances where media personnel were subjected to physical assault or manhandling while in the field.

Knife attack in Pasni

On February 8, a reporter with *Vsh News* Sajjad Noor and cameraperson Rehan Bizenjo suffered minor injuries in a knife attack in Pasni of the Balochistan province.

Talking to the PPF, Noor who is also the Bureau Chief of an Urdu newspaper *Daily Intikhab* and president of the Pasni Press Club said that the man who attacked them, Rahim Jan, was an employee of the Pasni Fish Harbour Authority (PFHA). Noor believed that they were attacked by the PFHA because they ran an investigative story that it received Rs800 million from Japan to invest in the authority, but it misappropriated the funds. He added that Jan also gave them life threats. He added that the incident took place when Bizenjo and himself were buying goods at a bakery.

Noor lamented that many journalists are attacked when they publish investigative pieces, but no action is taken against the culprits.

An FIR was registered against Jan at the Pasni police station. On February 9, he was arrested. Pasni police station Sub-Inspector Abid Baloch confirmed the arrest of Jan.

"According to an initial probe, Rahim Jan is a local and a drug addict. He is not an employee of PFHA. At present, he is in a judicial lock-up and further investigation in being carried out," he stated.

Hazara Democratic Party Chairman Abdul Khaliq, Hazara Public Accounts Committee Chairman Akhtar Hussain, opposition leader Malik Sikander, Advocate Senator Naseebullah, Speaker Balochistan Mir Abdul Qadoos Bizenjo also condemned the incident.

***Samaa TV* reporter manhandled**

On October 18, *Samaa TV* reporter Sanjay Sadhwani was allegedly [manhandled](#) at the Karachi rally of the Pakistan Democratic Movement, an opposition movement against the government. According to the news outlet, a man claiming to be a volunteer told Sadhwani to leave even after he saw his press card.

The report added that Sadhwani was filming those who were trying to leave the rally when he was stopped.

Another *Samaa TV* reporter Roohan Ahmed shared a clip of Sindh Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah condemning the incident and stating that he has already asked to find out who was responsible.

Media workers arrested and imprisoned

In 2020, there have been at least six media personnel that were arrested or imprisoned.

Mir Shakilur Rehman

Perhaps the most high profile case of a media personnel arrested in the past year was the arrest of the Jang and Geo Media Group Editor in Chief Mir Shakilur Rehman on March 12. Rehman was arrested by the National Accountability Bureau in connection with a purchase of a 54-kanal piece of land, *Dawn* reported. On April 28, he was sent to jail.

While Rehman's arrest was in relation to a property case, it raised concern about press freedom in Pakistan and was seen as an attempt to silence the largest media network in the country.

Shortly after a government press conference on Rehman's arrest, cable operators received instructions to either stop the broadcast of *Geo TV* or to shift it to last numbers. This is a tactic that has been used against *Geo TV* previously as well and works to reduce accessibility of the channel, creating financial pressures for the media outlet.

There were both domestic and international calls for Rehman's release. On November 9, eight months after he was arrested, the Supreme Court [granted bail](#) to Rehman.

Azharul Haq Wahid

In January of this year, a journalist associated with *Channel Five* and daily newspaper *Khabrain*, Azharul Haq Wahid, was arrested by the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) and a criminal complaint (FIR) was registered against him. *Dawn.com* quoted the FIR as stating: "It had been learnt during scrutiny of social that anti-state and defamatory material against the public functionaries and state departments is being uploaded through a Facebook ID".

A day after his arrest, the FIA was granted physical remand of Wahid. On January 29, a court in Lahore rejected his plea for bail.

Ehtisham Kiyani

On September 23, *Channel 24* reporter, Ehtisham Kiyani, was arrested by Islamabad police.

According to *Dawn.com*, Kiyani had arrived at the Islamabad High Court (IHC) to cover a hearing regarding Pakistan Muslim League Vice President Maryam Nawaz. As per the media report, Kiyani was

stopped at a checkpoint outside the court and despite introducing himself he was detained. As per police, he was carrying weapons. A police official later said that no weapons were recovered from him.

The reporter was released after IHC Chief Justice Athar Minallah took notice, summoned high-ranking officials of the Islamabad police and ordered his immediate release, *Dawn.com* [reported](#).

Saeed Ali Achakzai and Mateen Achakzai

On June 20, [two journalists](#) — Saeed Ali Achakzai of *Samaa News TV* and Mateen Achakzai of *Khyber News TV* — based in the border city of Chaman in the Balochistan province were arrested and brutally beaten by security personnel because of their coverage of poor conditions in the local coronavirus quarantine centre.

The two journalists were arrested by district administration under the Maintenance of Public Order Act and shifted to jail. They were released after three days and an investigation was initiated into the incident by the provincial government.

Balochistan Home Minister Zia Langove referred to it as a “brutal incident” and said that three officials directly involved in it had been suspended. Furthermore, the case against the journalists had been dropped.

Bilal Farooqi

On September 11, English-language daily *The Express Tribune* News Editor, [Bilal Farooqi](#), was “picked up” by police from outside his house in Karachi. Hours later he was released.

Farooqi was detained in response to a criminal complaint registered against him on September 9.

According to *The Express Tribune*, the journalist’s wife, Tashfeen Farooqi said their landlord asked Farooqi to come outside with his identity card as police were conducting a “survey” in their street. When her husband didn’t return, she went to see and he wasn’t there.

Additionally, the landlord said that the journalist had been driven away by two policemen who were accompanied by two men who were not in uniform. She later received a call from her husband who said he was being held at the Defence police station. Police again visited their residence again and took Bilal’s mobile phone from his wife.

Farooqi was released on the personal bail of his lawyer the next day. A Sindh Law Department spokesperson said that they would investigate the criminal complaint.

Disappearance of journalists

A tactic that has been used to intimidate and threaten journalists in the past year has been to orchestrate their abduction or disappearance. In two instances documented by PPF during 2020, journalists have gone missing for multiple hours.

These methods of threatening the media are not only concerning in terms of the physical safety of the journalists but also their mental well being. The repeated occurrence of such incidents indicates the impunity that exists for this model of harassing journalists.

Matiullah Jan

On July 21, senior journalist [Matiullah Jan](#) was abducted from Islamabad. He was released 12 hours after his abduction.

Shortly after initial reports about Jan going missing circulated, the journalist's son posted an update from his father's Twitter account confirming that he had been abducted from the heart of the capital [Islamabad]. "I demand he be found and the agencies behind it immediately be held responsible. God keep him safe," he added.

After Jan's abduction, CCTV footage that appeared to show the moments before he went missing were circulated on social media.

According to *Dawn.com*, Jan's wife, Kaneez Sughra, said his car was found parked outside a school in Islamabad's Sector G-6. One of his mobile phones was inside the car. She also told *AFP* that there were "more than five people — some in civilian clothes, others in black uniforms — who forcibly picked up my husband".

Security footage captured by the school where Sughra teaches showed several men forcing Jan into a sedan outside the main gate. The footage showed Jan tossing a mobile phone over the school fence, and a school security guard handing it back to a man in uniform.

Speaking to *Voice of America*, Sughra [said](#) Jan had recently received threats "but told her not to worry about them".

According to family sources Jan was released by unidentified persons in a deserted area in Fateh Jung, outside the capital. Press reports added that he was okay and had not been tortured.

Jan's abduction led to a large outcry among the civil society both nationally and internationally. Many rights groups raised their voices for Jan's immediate release. Both government and opposition political leaders had also condemned the incident.

On October 28, the Supreme Court of Pakistan rejected a report submitted by the Islamabad inspector general of police regarding Jan's kidnapping.

According to *Dawn*, the apex court had taken up the case regarding his abduction as well as a contempt of court case initiated against the journalist for his tweets, during which they said that it “seemed like the IG had no clue how to investigate the case”.

As per the report, the SC bench asked the inspector general to assign the investigation to “some competent police officers or a committee of police officers and submit a comprehensive report to the court concerned”.

Ali Imran Syed

On October 24, another similar incident took place. *Geo News* senior reporter [Ali Imran Syed](#) returned to his family after he went missing for over 22 hours in Karachi.

Syed had gone to a nearby bakery but did not return home. Upon his return 22 hours later, according to *Geo News*, he told his wife that he was not physically harmed.

Once again calls were raised for Syed’s immediate recovery. Both the provincial Sindh government and the federal government expressed concern over the journalist’s disappearance.

The Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists (PFUJ) condemned the incident and asked the provincial police chief to release CCTV footage of the incident.

Meanwhile, the journalists’ safety association, Editors for Safety (EFS) expressed “grave concern” over Syed’s mysterious disappearance. As per the EFS statement they feared that Syed “may have been forcibly taken away because of his work on the recent political events in Karachi, including the arrest of opposition member, Captain Safdar”.

Prime Minister Khan had directed the interior ministry to stay in touch with the Sindh government and to monitor progress of the situation. Meanwhile, Sindh Chief Minister Shah said he wanted an hourly progress report and directed the provincial police chief to ensure Syed was recovered.

A joint fact finding committee was formed on the instructions of the prime minister to “ascertain the facts surrounding the disappearance and causes behind the same”. However, The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP), the Pakistan Bar Council (PBC) and the Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists (PFUJ) have rejected the investigation team and called for the formation of a judicial commission consisting of a judge of the Supreme Court of Pakistan.

Threats against media personnel

Media personnel face both physical threats as well threats and abuse online. PPF has recorded at least five instances where media workers were threatened as a result of their work. Threats to media workers both in the physical and digital realm are an intimidation tactic that can have chilling effects on press

freedom in the country. They make journalists fear for their safety and restrict freedom of expression by silencing the media and can also result in self censorship.

Ahmad Noorani

In August, investigative journalist [Ahmad Noorani](#) received life threats “for writing an investigative piece about the business fortunes of close relatives of a retired army officer”.

Noorani’s investigative report published in *Fact Focus* detailed the assets of the family of Lieutenant General (Retired) Asim Saleem Bajwa who is currently chairman of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor Authority (CPECA) and was the Special Advisor to the Prime Minister on Information and Broadcasting. Bajwa had served as the Commander Southern Command and Director General of the Inter Services Public Relations (ISPR), the media’s military wing.

In response to the story, Bajwa [tweeted](#): “A malicious propaganda story published on an unknown site, against me and my family, (just uploaded on social media) is strongly rebutted.”

The former DG ISPR had also issued a statement in response to the story. He submitted his resignation from the post of the premier’s special assistant which was initially rejected by the prime minister. Finally, on October 12, he had asked the premier to relinquish him from this position and this request was accepted.

Mehrab Shah Afridi

A reporter of an internet news agency based in Peshawar, *Tribal News Network*, Mehrab Shah Afridi received threatening phone calls by 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 received a first phone call from Malaysia, warning him of dire consequences.

Speaking to PPF, Afridi said that he had received five phone calls from a number and was asked why he had uploaded the video of Wazir.

“I also received death threats,” he said, adding that the caller had used abusive language against him. Afridi registered a first information report (FIR) against the caller at the Landi Kotal police station.

A Station House Office (SHO) at the station, Amjad Khan, said that the case was being investigated and the phone number had been sent to Peshawar, in order to trace the caller.

On April 28, Head Morer of Landi Kotal station, Ayaz told PPF that they had traced that the call

was coming from Malaysia but couldn't investigate further about who was threatening Afridi and why, due to a lack of resources. They said that for further investigation, the journalist should contact the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA).

Asif Ali Bhatti

On February 11, *Geo News* reporter Asif Ali Bhatti received threatening calls from Afghanistan. He again received death threats in March.

In the threats, Bhatti was asked to stop writing reports against the state and religious scholars, otherwise his family would be killed. He added that he was also being traced and was told that he is *wajib-ul-qatal* (deserving of death).

Speaking to PPF, Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists (PFUJ) President Shazada Zulfiqar condemned the case and said that Bhatti had been receiving threats for four to five months and no one was taking action. He said that due to this, Bhatti and his family had shifted to Lahore, but then his family was being threatened so he came back to Islamabad.

Talking to the PPF, *Geo Director News* Rana Jawad, said that Bhatti received threats due to his columns. He said that the case had been reported and they were trying to determine who was issuing these threats. He said that they had asked the employee to take a leave or given him the option to work from another station besides Islamabad. Jawad added that they had discussed the case with some religious parties but did not specify with whom.

Abdul Majeed Bhatti and Shoaib Jutt

In February, two sports reporters — Abdul Majid Bhatti of *Jang/Geo News* and Shoaib Jutt of *Samaa TV* — received threatening phone calls “warning them of grave consequences”, *The News* reported.

Speaking to PPF, Bhatti said that on February 12, he received a call from 3-digit international number (001) and the caller warned him of death threats. Later, he also received text messages with offensive language.

Bhatti further said that a few days ago he was working on a story on Pakistani cricketer Shadab Khan's scandal in which the alleged girlfriend of Khan had accused him of blackmailing and cheating on her.

Jutt also told PPF that he received more than eight threatening calls from the same caller ID and their call duration was less than 36 seconds. Soon after receiving the calls, both the journalists informed their news organizations and journalists' unions.

Section 6: Legislation and government rhetoric

Defamation cases

On January 25, PTI stalwart Jahangir Tareen sent defamation notices to anchorpersons Shahzeb Khanzada of *Geo News* and Waseem Badami of *ARY News* Rs1 billion each.

According to [Dawn](#), the defamation notices were for making “false imputations in their news programmes that have or are likely to cause serious harm and injury to his reputation”. The PTI leader demanded that the two “withdraw their defamatory imputations, tender a proper public apology in their respective programmes as well as publish a contradiction of the said defamatory statements(s)”.

Khanzada said that he stood by his show, *Dawn* reported.

Daniel Pearl murder case

On April 2, 2020, the Sindh High Court (SHC) overturned the death penalty handed to the main accused, Ahmed Omar Saeed Sheikh, in the Daniel Pearl murder case. The high court also set aside the life terms handed down to three co-accused, *Dawn* reported.

Pearl was an American journalist with *The Wall Street Journal* who was kidnapped and beheaded in Karachi, Pakistan in 2002.

The United States condemned the decision. In a tweet, Chief US diplomat for South Asian affairs, Alice Wells, said that overturning the conviction of those responsible for Pearl’s murder was “an affront to victims of terrorism everywhere”. They also welcomed Pakistan’s decision to appeal the verdict. A day after the acquittal, all the accused in the case were rearrested.

The SHC’s decision was challenged by both the Sindh government and Pearl’s parents in separate appeals.

According to *Dawn.com*, on September 28, the Supreme Court began hearing the appeals and stopped the Sindh government from releasing the main accused.

On December 24, the SHC set aside the detention for the four who were set free in the case, *Dawn* [reported](#).

Private members bill regarding armed forces

In September, a lawmaker belonging to the ruling PTI party introduced the Criminal Law (Amendment Bill) 2020 in the National Assembly “proposing anyone who was found engaging in intentional ridiculing and defaming of the armed forces of Pakistan or any of its members be penalised,” *The News* reported.

Human Rights Minister Shireen Mazari clarified that this was a private members bill and stated that reporters covering the parliament “really need to know the difference between private member bills and govt bills so that wrong headlines are not given in newspapers”.

In October, in an interview with *Der Spiegel*, Prime Minister Khan was asked about a possible new law prohibiting criticism of the army.

According to [Dawn](#), specifically with regards to the armed forces the premier was quoted as saying: “Every day, our security forces lose people in battle. Every country protects its institutions, not when they do something wrong, but when they’re being attacked.”

As per the report, the interviewer noted that the law could make it impossible for journalists to report on the army, in response to which he said: “There will be another way of dealing with the security forces — not through the media, but through the government. I will speak to the army chief if I think there's something wrong. There are always human rights violations in military operations and sometimes we speak about it when it happens. But this should not be done in public. When soldiers are risking their lives, you cannot demoralise them in public.”

Legislation authorizing raids

On July 22, the Punjab Assembly passed the ‘Tahaffuz-e-Bunyad-e-Islam Bill 2020’, which according to a *Geo* report, gives the Directorate General Public Relations (DGPR) the powers to “visit and inspect any printing press, publication house, book store and confiscate any book, before or after printing”.

Government rhetoric on press freedom

In an [interview](#) with *Al Jazeera* in September, Prime Minister Khan said currently it was the government and ministers who “felt unprotected”, not the media.

In the interview, the prime minister was asked about freedom of speech in Pakistan in response to which he said that he wanted any independent institution to do an assessment of freedom of speech in Pakistan in the past two years [since his government has been in power].

“In my country’s history, no government has taken such criticism. Criticism, I don’t mind but blatant propaganda against a government like it has happened against us.

“I spent almost 20 years of my life in England, I know what freedom of speech is. In England some of the things that have come up against me and my government ministers, had that happened in England, we would have claimed millions of dollars in damages.

“Unfortunately, it’s us — the government and the ministers — who feel unprotected. It's not the media. In these two years, it’s unheard of. What do they call intimidation? I mean if someone publishes a fake

news against the prime minister and the prime minister then takes him to the court, is that intimidation? It happens anywhere in the world. If the British prime minister was subjected to the sort of things that I have been he would have now been millions of dollars richer because he would have won the libel cases. I know what libel cases are. If anything the pendulum has gone the other way. We need protection.”

This rhetoric is consistent with previous remarks made by the premier in the past. On a visit to the United States in July 2019, the prime minister was asked about press freedom in Pakistan. According to a *Dawn* report, he said that it was a joke to talk about curbs on press freedom in the country.
