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## FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

# Pakistan

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Media freedoms worsened in 2011 as journalists faced an unprecedented level of violence and threats from a range of sources, including the military, intelligence services, and militant groups. The constitution and other legislation, such as the Official Secrets Act, authorize the government to curb freedom of speech on subjects including the constitution itself, the armed forces, the judiciary, and religion. Harsh blasphemy laws have occasionally been used to suppress the media. There were some calls to reform the blasphemy laws in early 2011, but several prominent politicians who spoke out in favor of reform were threatened or killed by extremists, leading to a major chilling effect on discussion of the issue. Under the 2004 Defamation Act, offenders can face minimum fines of 100,000 rupees (\$1,200) and prison sentences of up to five years, but the legislation has not yet been used to convict journalists. Since 2010, broadly defined contempt laws have increasingly been used by the judiciary to curb reporting on particular cases or judges, and a number of print and television outlets were threatened with contempt charges during 2011. Accessing official information remains difficult. In July 2011, the government directed public employees to refrain from giving “embarrassing” information to the media. In October, National Assembly member Sherry Rehman, a former journalist, introduced the Right to Information Bill. If passed, it would replace the 2002 Ordinance on Freedom of Information with the aim of disclosing more information to the public. The bill had not been approved at year’s end.

After almost a decade, the Press Council of Pakistan, officially established through a 2002 ordinance and comprising a mix of industry representatives and nominated members from various societal groups, started functioning in late 2011, with the mission of hearing complaints against the media and promoting journalistic ethics. Broadcast media are regulated by the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA). Officials continued to engage in sporadic efforts to temporarily suspend certain broadcasts or programs under other media regulations, including an official code of conduct, or through the ad hoc banning of broadcast rights or blockage of transmissions around sensitive events, such as the killing of terrorist leader Osama bin Laden in May 2011. Recent legislative proposals emanating from both the National Assembly and the Senate would restrict live coverage of violence or terrorist attacks. The proposals also contained broadly worded clauses that would ban the broadcast of any content considered “defamatory against the organs of the state.” The bills were not approved by year’s end.

Political actors, government officials, and military and intelligence officers regularly complain about critical coverage, and some have attempted to exert control over media content through unofficial “guidance” to newspaper editors on placement of front-page stories and permissible topics of coverage. Fear of reprisals has caused some journalists to refrain from being overly critical or overstepping unspoken boundaries, particularly concerning military or intelligence operations. Self-censorship also occurs with regard to coverage of sensitive social or religious issues—in 2011, for example, the topic of reforming the blasphemy laws became much more sensitive—as well as certain militant groups and political parties.

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The physical safety of journalists remains a key concern. Intimidation by intelligence agencies and the security forces—including physical attacks and arbitrary, incommunicado detention—continues to take place. In late May 2011, Syed Saleem Shahzad, an investigative reporter and author whose work focused on Islamist militancy, was abducted, tortured, and killed, allegedly by the Directorate for Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI); Shahzad had previously received threats from the agency. Amid an outcry following his death, an official commission was established to investigate the murder. Islamist fundamentalists, mercenaries hired by feudal landlords or local politicians, party activists, security forces, and police have been known to harass journalists and attack media offices. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), at least seven journalists were murdered because of their work in 2011, making Pakistan the world's deadliest country for members of the press. While some of these reporters were deliberately targeted, others were killed as they attempted to cover unfolding political events or military operations, or were among the victims of large-scale suicide bombings. Impunity is the norm for such crimes, with many murder cases from previous years remaining unsolved. Reporters regularly receive verbal threats, and in 2011 several high-profile journalists—including the husband-and-wife team Najam Sethi and Jugnu Mohsin, editor and publisher, respectively, of the *Friday Times*—made such threats public in an attempt to draw more attention to the problem. Some, such as Hamid Mir, a senior television anchor, then received protection from the Interior Ministry, according to CPJ, but others were forced into either temporary or permanent exile.

Conditions for reporters covering the ongoing conflict in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province remained difficult in 2011, as a number of correspondents were detained, threatened, expelled, kidnapped, or otherwise prevented from working, either by Taliban militants and local tribal groups or by the army and intelligence services. Journalists' ability to cover military operations in these areas is hampered, as they can gain access only if they agree to become "embedded" with military units, which means that any reporting is subject to potential censorship. Reporters in the restive Balochistan Province face pressure and harassment from Balochi nationalists, Islamist groups, and the government. In 2011, conditions for journalists in Balochistan deteriorated sharply; several were killed, including Javid Naseer Rind, deputy editor of the *Daily Tawar*, while others fled into exile after receiving repeated threats. Media remain much more tightly restricted in the FATA than elsewhere in Pakistan. Independent radio is allowed only with permission from the FATA secretariat, and no newspapers are published there. In Pakistani-administered Kashmir, publications need special permission from the regional government to operate, and proindependence publications are generally prohibited. Increasing civil conflict in the city of Karachi during 2011 also made reporting more difficult. In all of these regions, threats to journalists limited the news and information that was available to the general public.

A wide range of privately owned daily and weekly newspapers and magazines provide diverse and critical coverage of national affairs. The government continues to control Pakistan Television and Radio Pakistan, the only free-to-air broadcast outlets with a national reach; their staff receive directives from the Information Ministry, and their coverage supports official viewpoints. Private radio stations operate in some major cities but are prohibited from broadcasting news programming. However, in a dramatic opening of the media landscape in recent years, several dozen private all-news cable and satellite television channels—such as Geo, ARY, Aaj, and Dawn, some of which broadcast from outside the country—have arisen to provide live domestic news coverage, commentary, and call-in talk shows, informing viewers and shaping public opinion on current events. International television and radio broadcasts are usually available, with the exception of news channels based in India. However, in November 2011, cable operators blocked access to the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) in response to the airing of a documentary; the BBC's World News channel remained blocked through year's end.

Provincial and national authorities have used advertising or other types of boycotts to put economic pressure on media outlets that do not heed unofficial directives. A ban on official advertisements with the Jang Group, owner of the

Geo television station and a number of newspapers and known for its increasingly antigovernment editorial line, remained in effect in 2011, even following protests from trade organizations and members of civil society and media advocacy groups. Both state and private interests—including the powerful intelligence agencies—reportedly pay for favorable press coverage, a practice exacerbated by the low salary levels of many journalists.

The internet is not widely used, with just under 9 percent of the population accessing the medium in 2011. However, blogs are growing in popularity, and many traditional news outlets provide content over the internet. The 2008 Prevention of Electronic Crimes Ordinance criminalized cyberterrorism—broadly defined as using or accessing a computer, network, or electronic device for the purposes of frightening, harming, or carrying out an act of violence against any segment of the population or the government—and provided for harsh penalties in cases resulting in a death. The e-mail accounts of some journalists are reportedly monitored. While websites and blogs addressing sensitive subjects, particularly Balochi separatism, are routinely blocked, starting in 2010 the government moved to block “blasphemous” material as well. This trend continued in 2011, with attempts to censor websites and mobile phone content. For example, a September decision by the Lahore High Court ordered officials to block access to a number of websites, including the social-networking site Facebook.

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