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**SDG 16.10.1 Shadow Report on Pakistan**

**Prepared by**

**Pakistan Press Foundation (PPF)**

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**Section 1: Context**

Journalists in Pakistan work within a highly restrictive environment where attacks on press freedom are from many fronts and include physical attacks including murder, arrests, disappearances, threats, and journalists because of their work. In addition to being physical attacks media persons are also subjected to online smear campaigns which are now almost routine on social media platforms.

The media landscape in Pakistan is increasingly censored with the shrinking space for free expression shrinking. It is an environment where unstated extra-legal red lines as well as official directives on coverage are common and becoming ever more intrusive.

In an overwhelming majority of cases, the perpetrators of these attacks continue to enjoy impunity. Until very recently, the absence of safety legislation for the media led to not just a lack of action but also a lack of legal support and options for journalists to consider when they do come under attack.

Unfortunately, the government and state agencies as well as others in positions of power are often the source of attacks on press freedom in Pakistan, not only by issuing restrictive directives to restrict content, but also by initiating attacks against journalists and other media practitioners.

The Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) established in 2002 “to facilitate and regulate private electronic media'', regularly place bans television content and issues restrictive guidelines of media coverage thereby creating impediments to the public’s right to information.

Similarly, the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, 2016 expanded the already considerable power of the Pakistan Telecommunications Authority (PTA) to remove or block access to information and to issue guidelines to internet service providers.

While freedom of expression is a constitutionally guaranteed right in the country, there are significant exceptions in it that allow for restricting this fundamental right.

Article 19 of the Constitution of Pakistan states: *“*Every citizen shall have the right to freedom of speech and expression and there shall be freedom of the press*, subject to any reasonable restrictions imposed by the law in the interest of Islam, or the integrity, security or defence of Pakistan or any part thereof, friendly relations with foreign states, public order, decency or morality, or in relation to contempt of court, defamation or incitement to an offence.”*

On the positive side, a constitutional amendment in 2010 led to the addition of Article 19-A which makes the right to information a constitutional right of every citizen. Article 19-A states *“Every citizen shall have the right to have access to information in all matters of public importance subject to regulation and reasonable restrictions imposed by law.”*

This right, however, was tested during the past year with the spread of COVID-19 and restrictions to access of information that emerged in the year. Section 4 of this report looks at the impact of the coronavirus on press freedom and access to information.

In this report, Pakistan Press Foundation (PPF) looks at Pakistan’s progress or lack thereof towards Indicator 16.10.1 of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and evaluates the various measurements included in Indicator 16.10.1 during 2020, as well as what these figures, trends and observations indicate for 2021.

Target 16.10 of the UN SDGs calls on member states to: “Ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms, in accordance with national legislation and international agreements.” Indicator 16.10.1 of this target looks at: “Number of verified cases of killing, kidnapping, enforced disappearance, arbitrary detention and torture of journalists, associated media personnel, trade unionists and human rights advocates in the previous 12 months.”

Pakistan had presented Pakistan’s Voluntary National Review at a 2019 session of the UN High-Level Political Forum on eight SDG goals (SDGs 1, 2, 3, 5, 7, 8, 13, and 17). Goal sixteen and was among the priority goals for the country and was therefore not covered.

While Indicator 16.10.1 includes attacks on journalists, associated media personnel, trade unionists and human rights advocates, as a media research and documentation centre, PPF’s findings will focus specifically on journalists and media personnel.

One of the difficulties in presenting data on progress in achieving SDG 16.10.1 is lack of coordination between the federal and provincial governments. It is the provincial and not the federal governments that are responsible of issues related to law and order, including attacks on journalists and media professionals. At present neither the federal nor the provincial governments have any mechanism to systematically collect information related to attacks on journalists and media practitioners.

One positive development was that on June 28, 2021, the provincial assembly of Sindh, passed a landmark *Sindh Protection of Journalists and Other Media Practitioners Bill 2021* while a similar bill had earlier been presented in Pakistan’s National Assembly and is awaiting consultations in the Human Rights Committee.

The bill passed in Sindh envisages the creation of a robust, inclusive and autonomous *Commission on Safety of Journalists and Other Media Practitioners* comprising government duty bearers as well as media stakeholders to monitor investigations and prosecutions of crimes against the media practitioners.

Both bills by the federal and provincial governments recognize journalists’ right to professional privacy and undertake to implement the United Nations Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity.

**Section 2: Press Freedom in Pakistan in 2020**

In 2020, PPF recorded: one murder of a journalist, three enforced disappearances, seven incidents of arbitrary detention, ten incidents of torture, eighteen government directives regarding content including bans, four instances of legal action against media, four incidents of internet restrictions and four incidents of legislative action.

As physical attacks against the media continued to threaten the lives and safety of journalists, 2020 also witnessed more coercive techniques including extra-legal abductions and the registration of criminal cases against media workers resulting in widespread practice of self-censorship in Pakistani media.

The year also saw more legislative action, changes of rules as well as other legal barriers to free expression being enacted particularly on freedom of expression online. In 2020, attempts to limit free speech online particularly on social media platforms picked up intensity.

The most evident measure of this was legislation to monitor content online. In January, social media rules, Citizens Protection (Against Online Harm) Rules, 2020, were approved by the federal cabinet under the Pakistan Telecommunications Act, 1996 and PECA. These draconian rules give a great degree of authority to the government in monitoring content online including assisting law enforcement agencies to access to online data, and authority to give directives to remove content. Under these 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.” These rules were met by strong pushback which led to their suspension in March 2020.

In November 2020, the Ministry of Information Technology notified the “Removal and Blocking of Unlawful Online Content (Procedure, Oversight and Safeguards) Rules 2020” which have been challenged in the courts.

During 2020, journalists also felt the brunt of PTA’s actions to restrict content on social media and to ramp up criminalization of content shared online. Criminal complaints were registered against media workers for content they had shared on social media.

This direct policing of content shared online alongside a growing effort to legislate and create rules to control content resulted in a shrinking space for free expression in the online sphere that had been more open and accessible than traditional media.

Measures to control the flow of content online led to the temporary ban on the popular video streaming social media platform, Tik Tok. While Tik Tok was restored days after the ban was imposed, it showed the extent to which the government bodies are willing to go to restrict content online.

Pakistan fell to the 90th rank of 120 countries on the Inclusive Internet Index[[1]](#footnote-1) released by the Economist Intelligence Unit in its report for 2021. In 2020, it stood at the 89th position, indicating a worsened position over the year.

Accounts on social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram are routinely reported for having objectionable content. Journalists had to deal with criminal complains (First Information Reports) registered against them for tweets that they had published on their personal Twitter accounts.

On the Freedom House, Freedom of the Net 2020[[2]](#footnote-2) ranking, Pakistan scored twenty-six out of one hundred and was placed in the “not free” category.

According to the report, the online environment is “tightly controlled by the government” and “internet shutdowns, blocked websites, and arrests for activity online remain authorities’ preferred tactics in their effort to suppress unwanted speech.”

In the online sphere, attacks on free expression take on a gendered angle with women journalists being the targets of smear campaigns, trolling and abuse online. This was escalated during the COVID-19 pandemic, as the world increasingly went online to gather and disseminate information in a time of lockdowns and restrictions to physical movement.

Restrictions on free expression were not exclusive to content shared online. PEMRA, the regulator for broadcast media, was highly very in 2020. As important national political or current events occurred, the directives by PEMRA appeared to dictate blanket bans on certain topics. This created a scenario where major national or local developments were not reported by television channels, leaving the public in the dark because television is the most popular news source for Pakistanis.

In terms of physical attacks on journalists, 2020 can be seen as a less violent year for the media. During the year, PPF has recorded one death of a journalist that was confirmed to be in connection with their work.

A more troubling development during the year were at least three instances of enforced disappearance of media workers. In all instances, the targeted media worker went missing for hours before being returned without any reason being given for their disappearance. Enforced disappearances are particularly terrifying because of the lack of accountability for those who perpetrated these attacks as well as the chilling effect on the media fraternity.

The fear that journalists can be picked up without any explanation has resulted in widespread self-censorship and feelings of insecurity. Those behind such acts of intimidation succeed in their objective of silencing critical voices thus completely undermining the Target 16.10 of the SDG that calls for the public’s access to information and the protection of fundamental freedoms.

On the positive sided the provincial assembly of Sindh passed a landmark Sindh Protection of Journalists and Other Media Practitioners Bill 2021, while a similar bill had earlier been presented in Pakistan’s National Assembly, where it has been sent to the Human Rights Committee for consideration.

The bill passed by the provincial assembly of Sindh envisages the creation of a robust, inclusive and autonomous *Commission on Safety of Journalists and Other Media Practitioners* comprising government duty bearers as well as media stakeholders, including the Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists (PFUJ), the Council of Pakistan Newspaper Editors (CPNE), the All Pakistan Newspaper Society (APNS), the Pakistan Broadcasters Association (PBA), the Sindh Commission on Information Commission and the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP).

Both bills by the federal and provincial governments recognise journalists’ right to professional privacy and undertake to implement the United Nations Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity.

PPF played a leading role in maintaining momentum for the passage of legislation on journalists’ protection in the Sindh province following the presentation in February 2020 of the draft *Protection of Journalists and Media Professionals Bill 2020* in the federal cabinet.

While the federal *Protection of Journalists and Media Professionals Bill* does provide framework for journalists’ safety legislation in Pakistan, it also contains a number of weaken and negative clauses that need to be amended or removed. PPF has thus called for prompt and effective consultations so that the federal bill could be further improved and then be approved at the earliest by the National Assembly.

There is also need for Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan provinces, as well as Gilgit Baltistan and Azad Kashmir, would follow suit and enact similar laws without any delay.

**Section 3: Detailed figures**

This section of the report presents a breakdown of figures for the various categories of attacks on press freedom.

The categorization of the data presented therefore is based on the categories included in Indicator 16.10.1: killing, kidnapping, enforced disappearance, arbitrary detention, and torture of media workers. In addition, further categories have been added to cover “other harmful acts.”

We have further expanded “other harmful acts'' into sub-categories. These are based on the categorizations included in the Freedom of Expression Shadow Report on Implementation of SDG 16.10.1 in Latin America as these regional indicators are suitable categorizations for press freedom attacks observed in Pakistan as well. However, they have been adapted to fit the local context for Pakistan.

1. Killing
2. Kidnapping
3. Enforced Disappearance
4. Arbitrary Detention
5. Torture

**Other harmful acts:**

1. Raids
2. Internet Restrictions
3. Government directives
4. Legal Action Against Media Outlets and Journalists
5. Legislative action
6. **Killing:**

**One** incident recorded.

* February 16- *KTN* journalist Aziz Memon’s body recovered in Mehrabpur in the Sindh province. **[Killing]**

1. **Kidnapping:**

**Zero** incidents recorded.

1. **Enforced Disappearance:**

**Three** incidents recorded.

* July 21- Senior journalist Matiullah Jan abducted from Islamabad. **[abduction]**
* September 12- *Express Tribune* journalist Bilal Farooqi picked up in Karachi. **[abduction leading to arrest]**
* October 23- *Geo News* senior reporter Ali Imran Syed goes missing. **[abduction]**

1. **Arbitrary Detention:**

**Seven** incidents recorded.

* January 16- *Channel Five* and daily *Khabrain* journalist Azharul Haq Wahid arrested by the Federal Investigation Agency. **[arrest]**
* March 12- *Jang and Geo Media Group* Editor in Chief Mir Shakilur Rehman arrested by the National Accountability Bureau. **[arrest]**
* April 6- *24 News* reporter Tauqeer Zaidi and cameraperson Wajahat Zaidi arrested by local police in Dera Ismail Khan. **[arrest]**
* April 28- Abaseen Union of Journalists’ member Mohammad Iqbal arrested in Swabi by police on instruction of officials. **[detention]**
* June 20- *Samaa TV* journalist Saeed Ali Achakzai and *Khyber News TV* journalist Mateen Achakzai arrested and beaten in Chaman. **[arrest]**
* September 23- *24 News Television* senior journalist Ehtisham Kiani arrested by police outside Islamabad High Court. **[detention]**
* December 25- *Neo News* reporter Ali Raza Sheikh and *Roz News* reporter Aneel Asghar detained for coverage of a police check post in Gujar Khan Rawalpindi. **[detention]**

1. **Torture:**

**Ten** incidents reported.

* January 5- Federal minister Fawad Chaudhry slapped senior anchorperson Mubashir Lucman. **[physical assault]**
* February 5- *Tribal News Network* correspondent Shah Nawaz Khan threatened by policemen for making a video of a fight between them and a rickshaw driver. **[threats/physical assault]**
* February 8- *Vsh News* reporter Sajjad Noor and cameraperson Rehan Bizenjo were injured in a knife attack in Pasni, Balochistan. **[physical assault]**
* February 11- *Geo News* reporter Asif Ali Bhatti received threatening calls from Afghanistan. **[threats]**
* February 29- *Tribal News Network* reporter Mehrab Shah Afridi received threatening phone calls by an unknown individual for his reports on social media in his hometown of Landi Kotal. **[threats]**
* April 8- *Daily Khabrain* journalist Noor Muhammad Buledi received threatening calls following a story on malpractice in a road construction project in Bajaur district. **[threats]**
* May 1- *Daily Pahanji Akhbar* and *Times News TV* reporter Aftab Hussain Keerio sustained multiple injuries; found unconscious in Bhirya City. **[physical assault]**
* June 20- *Samaa TV* journalist Saeed Ali Achakzai and *Khyber News TV* journalist Mateen Achakzai arrested and beaten in Chaman. **[physical assault/arrest]**
* October 18- *Samaa TV* reporter Sanjay Sadhwani manhandled at Karachi rally of Pakistan Democratic Movement, a coalition of opposition political parties. **[physical assault]**
* December 1- *K21 News* Bureau Chief Faiz Muhammad Buledi received threats from the private secretary of the Sindh Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah. **[threats]**

**Other Harmful Acts**

1. **Raids**

**Three** incidents recorded.

* January 6- Writer Mohammed Hanif said his Urdu publisher’s office was raided.
* July 27- Pakistan Rangers entered the Karachi Press Club (KPC) without permission of the club.
* September 15- Senior journalist Suhail Warraich’s book removed from book stalls.

1. **Internet Restrictions:**

**Four** incidents recorded.

* July 1- PTA temporarily bans online game Players’ Unknown Battle Ground (PUBG) **[government directive/internet restriction]**
* August 12- Women journalists critical of government targeted on social media **[threats]**
* August 30- Investigative journalist Ahmad Noorani receives threats following reporting on the business fortunes of close relatives of a retired army officer. **[threats]**
* October 9- Pakistan Telecommunication Authority bans Tik Tok **[government directive/internet restriction]**

1. **Government directives:**

**Eighteen** incidents recorded.

* January 16- *ARY News* anchor Kashif Abbasi banned for 60 days.
* January 20- PEMRA bans *Bol TV* show Champions and host Waqar Zaka for airing objectionable content.
* February 1- *Channel 92* fined Rs1million for airing defamatory content against a special assistant to the prime minister Zulfikar Bukhari.
* March 6- PEMRA issues advisory on coverage of Aurat March, the annual Women’s Day march held across Pakistan.
* April 7- PEMRA issues *Dawn News TV* show cause notice for incorrect news regarding death of British prime minister.
* April 17- PEMRA bans live audiences for Ramadan transmissions due to COVID-19.
* May 6- PEMRA suspends license for *NEO TV.*
* June 25- PEMRA issues directive for reporting and coverage of COVID-19.
* June 29- PEMRA issues notice to channels for “irresponsible coverage” of a terrorist attack on the Pakistan Stock Exchange in Karachi.
* June 29- PEMRA issues notice to private channels for reporting that Kuwait Airways had grounded Pakistani pilots and engineers.
* July 1- PTA temporarily bans online game Players’ Unknown Battle Ground (PUBG) **[government directive/internet restriction]**
* July 23- Punjab bans one hundred books being taught in private schools.
* August 30- PEMRA suspends *24 News HD* license.
* September 23- PEMRA issues notice to Gold Cable Network over illegal distribution of Indian channels and content on its network.
* October 1- PEMRA bans coverage of absconders.
* October 2- PEMRA bans coverage of the Lahore motorway rape case.
* October 5- PEMRA urges broadcasters/advertisers to refrain from using themes that do not correspond with the product.
* October 9- Pakistan Telecommunication Authority bans Tik Tok **[government directive/internet restriction]**

1. **Legal Action Against Media Outlets and Journalists:**

**Four** incidents recorded.

* January 25- Anchorpersons Shahzeb Khanzada and Waseem Badami sent defamation notices by senior politician Jehangir Tareen.
* September 9- FIR registered against *Express Tribune* journalist Bilal Farooqi.
* September 11- FIR registered against former PEMRA Chairman Absar Alam
* September 12- FIR registered against journalist Asad Ali Toor

**10)Legislative Action:**

**Four** incidents recorded.

* January 28- Federal cabinet approves Citizens Protection (Against Online Harm) Rules, 2020
* July 22- The Punjab Assembly passes the ‘Tahaffuz-e-Bunyad-e-Islam Bill 2020’ granting inspection powers of printing presses.
* September- Lawmaker belonging to the ruling Pakistan Tehreek Insaf party introduced the Criminal Law (Amendment Bill) 2020 in the National Assembly proposing anyone found engaging in intentional ridiculing and defaming of the armed forces of Pakistan or any of its members be penalized.
* November 18- Information technology ministry notifies Removal and Blocking of Unlawful Online Content (Procedure, Oversight and Safeguards) Rules 2020.

**Section 4: Impact of COVID-19**

The spread of COVID-19 created a new global crisis that countries scrambled to tackle in 2020. It also created a new challenge for journalists around the world including in Pakistan. The media was in the uncomfortable position of adjusting to the new normal it brought with social distancing, working from home as well as following protocol such as mask wearing while continuing their work as gatekeepers of information ensuring that at a time of global panic, they were able to inform their audience, verify news and yet remain safe themselves.

COVID-19 pandemic developed into a serious threat to the media in Pakistan — from the basic safety and well-being of journalists to financial constraints and challenges to the explicit attempts to control the nature of content and attacks on those covering the pandemic.

As Pakistan experienced the waves of the pandemic, the impact was also felt by the media of the country — both in terms of infections and deaths caused by COVID-19 as well as restrictions and attacks on free expression as a result of the pandemic.

In 2020, PPF recorded at least eight deaths of media workers in Pakistan due to the coronavirus and many others tested positive.

SDG Target 16.10 strives to ensure public access to information. When the lives of the very individuals responsible for doing so are at risk due to a virus, that access to information is also threatened. While the pandemic is not exclusively a challenge for the media alone, the media are often at the frontlines in ensuring coverage of the virus and developments related to it, thus being in a position of heightened exposure to the virus.

The onus lies on media outlets and government bodies in ensuring that media workers are provided with the necessary vaccination as well as personal protective equipment, provided routine testing, and assisted in creating the safest possible way to work under such circumstances. On the positive side, in May 2021 the government set up Covid vaccination camps in press clubs in some cities such as Islamabad and Karachi.

Bodies such as the Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists (PFUJ) had demanded that safety measures be provided for media workers. In the early months of the pandemic, the government had said that they would provide media personnel with the necessary personal protective equipment (PPE). In April 2020, then Information Minister Firdous Ashiq Awan had said that the government would provide journalists visiting quarantine centers and intensive care units with protective gear. Additionally, the government would launch a ‘Care for Media’ application which would provide information if someone in the community tested positive and provide them with assistance with treatment. This app is currently available for Android devices.

In terms of the media industry itself, there appear to be no clear-cut guidelines issued by the Pakistan Broadcasters Association, All Pakistan Newspapers Society, or the Council of Pakistan Newspaper Editors. UNICEF Pakistan has issued guidelines[[3]](#footnote-3) for media reporting on the pandemic, however, these are focused on how to cover the pandemic rather than the safety of the media reporting on the virus.

While the safety protocols of staff working in media offices are weak and not implemented properly, media organizations have provided no support or guidance on COVID for their correspondents who work in rural areas on a freelance or contract basis.

Beyond the direct impact on the health of journalists, the pandemic also created a new frontier for attacks on press freedom in Pakistan.

At least two instances of journalists were arrested for their coverage of the pandemic were reported in 2020.

In June, two broadcast journalists reporting for national TV channels — Saeed Ali Achakzai of *Samaa News TV* and Mateen Achakzai of *Khyber News TV —* were arrested and beaten by security personnel for their coverage of the conditions of a quarantine centre in Chaman in the Balochistan province. They were released three days after the arrest.

In another incident in April, two journalists — Tauqeer Zaidi of *24 News* and cameraperson Wajahat Zaidi — were arrested for reporting on a COVID-19 quarantine centre in Dera Ismail Khan in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. According to *Dawn*, the country’s largest English newspaper, the district administration denied the reports and said that the two were not associated with any media outlets. They said that the arrest was made for “propagating fake information” about the quarantine centre. Journalists however have shared the credentials of Tauqeer and Wajahat.

In both instances, the arrests were made under the Maintenance of Public Order Act.

Days after this incident, PEMRA, the regulatory body for broadcast media issued guidelines on what the media could cover with regards to the virus. In one such directive, issued on June 25, PEMRA directed the media that they could not telecast any violence at hospitals, any emergency, attack, or offensive behavior towards healthcare workers. The rationale for this move was to prevent the healthcare workers from being demoralized.

Such guidelines are an attack on the public’s access to information. While the media must follow the appropriate ethics and professionals’ standards for reporting on health or emergency situations, overly restrictive regulatory guidelines deny coverage of important aspects aspect of the pandemic that should be covered. The result has been a sanitized, limited and government narrative-driven rhetoric that is likely to be missing important developments.

Meanwhile, as the world went online and increasingly relied on social media platforms to share information, government bodies and troll accounts used this as a new way of intimidating journalists and undermining their credibility.

In Pakistan, this impact was specifically felt by women journalists[[4]](#footnote-4), who in August, issued a public statement drawing attention to the attacks they were experiencing on social media. They stated that these attacks were being launched against those women journalists with critical reporting of the government party Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf and particularly their handling of COVID-19. They said these attacks were instigated by government officials and political leaders.

The pandemic also exacerbated the financial struggle for the media in Pakistan. According to the US State Department’s annual country reports[[5]](#footnote-5) on human rights practices, as private revenues of media houses fell due to the economic impact of COVID-19, they became more dependent on government advertising.

In a Friedrich Ebert Stiftung report ‘Journalism in the Age of COVID-19- Perspectives from Pakistan’[[6]](#footnote-6), the Vice Chairperson of Pakistan Advertising Association Seema Jafar is quoted saying the advertising industry has seen a “substantial drop” in ad spend across media. She explained that other than for essential products, advertisers have held bank on special and additionally they larger brands have diverted funds to corporate social responsibility activities.

In the report, President of the Pakistan Broadcasters Association (PBA) Shakeel Masud Khan said that since August 2018 revenue had dropped 30-35 per cent. However, with COVID-19, it fell further 20-25 per cent. Khan noted that radio was the worst affected, seeing a cumulative loss of 75-80 per cent revenue.

The report also noted that some media houses had asked staff to work on 50 per cent of their salaries, while others laid off employees and closed certain departments.



**Section 5: Trends in 2021**

The first five months of 2021 indicate that this year is likely to see similar trends when it comes to free expression in Pakistan and the country’s compliance of SDG 16.10.1 is likely to remain consistent to that of 2020.

As with the previous year, in 2021, the controlling of content online particularly on social media platforms appears to be a repeat trend.

In March 2021, the Peshawar High Court had ordered a temporary ban on Tik Tok. The PTA complied with this order and the application was once again banned in the country. In April, the ban was lifted.

On April 16, in a drastic development, Pakistan faced a complete blackout of social media platforms — including Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Telegram and WhatsApp — which according to the PTA was “in order to maintain public order and safety”. The move had come during days of protests by the now banned religious party Tehreek-i-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP). This blanket ban on social media left citizens in the dark with little information about what was happening in the country. It also cut off a means of communication, particularly WhatsApp, that people rely on. According to a survey[[7]](#footnote-7) conducted by Gallup Pakistan December 2019, 39 percent of Pakistanis use WhatsApp – 48% in urban areas and 34% in rural areas.

At the same time as content online continues to face bans, broadcast media is also experiencing blanket bans on coverage. Considering the same protests by Tehreek-i-Labbaik Pakistan(TLP), a religious political party which has been proscribed by the federal government, PEMRA banned coverage of the party on television and radio. At a point where the TLP was a source of protests, road closures and disruption in many cities, a ban on coverage of its activities restricted the public’s access to information. The media was unable to report on any developments that are taking place and the public had to rely on online media platforms as well as social media, which itself saw a temporary ban.

Since the start of 2021, PEMRA appears to be following a similar pattern as it adopted in 2021 with multiple directives issuing a complete ban on topics. In one directive, the media regulatory body curtailed the media from criticizing the accountability watchdog, National Accountability Bureau (NAB). Furthermore, it accused the media coverage of NAB as an intent to malign the state institution.

While there have not been any cases of deaths of journalists in connection with their work in the year so far, these sorts of steps that restrict content and set guidelines for what the media is permitted to and banned from covering, have a powerful impact in muzzling free speech. The media is unable to fulfill its obligation of informing the people and left with no choice but to censor its content.

In 2021, observing such state directives and bans on content will be important indicators of understanding the forms of censorship being used in the country and in developing an effective policy to combat these. The challenge here lies at the state level censorship being imposed and the inability of media outlets to defy such orders without facing serious repercussions.

As observed in other countries of the region, Pakistan is also during a third wave of the coronavirus. As COVID-19 continues to spread across the country, its impacts in terms of the media i.e., acts of restricting free coverage, health, and safety of journalists, will be an important indicator to watch over in 2021. In comparison to 2020, this year, the beginning of the vaccination drive against COVID-19 has also been initiated and is likely to keep the pandemic on the news agenda even when cases of the virus may slow down.

In a worrying development, physical attacks on journalists have also been recorded in the first few months of 2021. On May 23, journalist, and blogger Asad Toor faced an armed attack in his home in the country’s capital Islamabad. A month earlier, former PEMRA chairman Absar Alam was shot on April 20, while taking an evening stroll near his house in Islamabad.

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**Section 6: Recommendations**

In this section of the report, we focus on ways in which SDG 16.10.1 compliance can be improved, particularly measures that the government can take to improve the situation.

* Every killing, kidnapping, enforced disappearance, arbitrary detention and torture of journalists and associated media personnel should be investigated by the head of government bodies, whether this be the provincial or federal government. Each attack on a journalist should be investigated by the authorities to reduce impunity in crimes against journalists.
* Effective national and provincial legislations for protection of journalists and media practitioners must be enacted without any delay. While it is positive that the provincial assembly of Sindh has passed the *Protection of Journalists and Other Media Practitioners Bill 2021,* the federal *Protection of Journalists and Media Professionals Bill* *2021* contains a number of weaken and negative clauses that need to be amended or removed.
* There should be prompt and effective consultations with media stakeholders so that the federal *Protection of Journalists and Media Professionals Bill* *2021* is improved and then be approved at the earliest by the National Assembly.
* There is also need for Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan provinces, as well as Gilgit-Baltistan and Azad Kashmir, would follow suit and enact similar laws similar to Sindh’s *Protection of Journalists and Other Media Practitioners Bill 2021* without any delay.
* The government must provide more clarity on legislation regarding social media. Social media rules developed have repeatedly been criticized by civil society and to ensure that if there is legislation regarding this platform, stakeholders are actively involved in the process.
* There government should be more inclusive in consultations with main civil society organizations working on different aspects of SDG 16.10.1 such as those working on press freedom, internet freedom, digital rights, and cyber security.
* The government should assist media houses and ensure that media workers who are often on the frontline are provided with the safety measures relating to COVID-19 such as vaccinations and protective equipment as well as the cost of treatment for those who are infected.
* Federal and provincial governments in Pakistan should start implementing recommendations of the UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity and produce annual progress reports as envisaged in the federal and Sindh province’s bills on protection of journalists.

1. <https://theinclusiveinternet.eiu.com/explore/countries/PK/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/pakistan/freedom-net/2020> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. https://www.unicef.org/pakistan/media/2596/file/Guidelines%20for%20Media%20Reporting%20on%20COVID%20-%20ENGLISH%20-%202020.pdf.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. https://docs.google.com/document/d/1DD8BQ53noKO6zHy-gysGnFjeKT4ride4uYtQsNNRYoc/edit [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/pakistan/ [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/pakistan/17234.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. http://gallup.com.pk/wp/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/6th-December-2019-English.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-7)