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## Pakistani Journalist: In the Line of Fire

**Abstract:** *This study aims to identify the challenges posed by Pakistan's Journalists and Media workers during the war on terror. Pakistan being the strategic ally of US interests became the combined foe of terror groups. Its citizens too became the target of terrorism. Since its inception; Pakistan has been struggling to hold on to the criterion of a stable state. Its constantly deteriorating state of affairs had left deep marks on the lives of its people. The ones who had suffered and sacrificed the most for their professional obligations were the media workers. They have been held at gunpoint by both the state and non-state actors. Their steadfastness in the face of terrorism, treason charges, torture and threats had made a remarkable chapter in the history of Pakistan*

**Key Words:** Media, Freedom, Journalists, Pakistan, War on Terror

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### Introduction

After the horrific terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, against humanity; a series of events unfolded which changed the lives of millions of people. The United States government retaliated to the attacks by going to the hideouts of the perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks. Hundreds of journalists from around the World started to pour into Afghanistan to cover the war on terror. Pakistan came into the limelight as it pledged its alliance to provide the gateway to foreign troops, military aid and media correspondents. Pakistani journalists with rich sources of information began to

cover the war on terror which was later broadcasted in the Western media. But the situation deteriorated when the Taliban and Al-Qaeda enlisted Pakistan as their enemy along with the US and NATO forces. Frequent Target killings and suicide bombings on Pakistani armed forces, professionals and common men began which posed a serious challenge to the writ of the state. Not even the media workers were spared who were in the line of fire; covering the war in Afghanistan. The terrorist groups accused journalists, field reporters and media workers of showing them evil and savage to the Western World.

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Pakistan's broadcast media became incredibly cautious while covering militancy after September 11, 2001. Indeed, between 2005 and 2010, media organizations covering terrorist activity in conflict-ridden areas, including Swat, Tank, Bannu, Waziristan and Malakand, came under increasing attacks. This was especially noticeable in regions where there was low-intensity fighting close to Afghanistan. Journalists in the conflict zone were either instructed to remain silent and practice self-censorship or to write stories that supported the Taliban when they came into contact with the Taliban or other radicals. The militants frequently carried out their threats if such demands were turned down or disregarded.

There have been several instances where reporters covering major issues have received death threats. After Pakistan joined forces with the US in the fight against terrorism; kidnapping journalists for ransom became a prevalent form of extortion. This continued to be the most common threat to journalists representing international media that covered the activities of *Jihadis*. One of the most shocking examples was the terrible incident that occurred in 2002; when the Wall Street writer Daniel Pearl was kidnapped and then beheaded on camera. This highlighted the vulnerability of the journalists working in War Journalism. The tribal districts of Pakistan had become "no-go" places as a result of death threats, limits on free speech, and restrictions on mobility. As a consequence, many journalists were compelled to leave these regions. While media workers continued to face substantial dangers from extremists; Pakistan's security forces also frequently target them. The region's intelligence agencies alleged that media workers had ties with the Taliban despite their commitment to their job. Another serious issue that many journalists encountered while covering conflict zones was forced reporting. The military frequently anticipated positive coverage of their actions in the media. According to a Balochistan-focused writer, the security forces brought numerous reporters into the war areas in 2006 to cover the anti-Baloch military campaign.

They were required to give favourable reports to the military and prohibited from raising critical questions to the top military officials

It was widely believed that the Pakistani military at the time employed a large number of prominent journalists in Quetta, Islamabad and former FATA. The goal was to limit the flow of information coming from the tribal territories, a practice that is still used today.

## Methodology

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This study uses qualitative literature review methods to investigate the research question; what were the challenges Pakistani journalists faced in the war on terror? Initially, different types of documents were considered for this study, including reports from international organizations on violence against journalists, the Constitution of Pakistan (1973), the Pakistan Penal Code, the Defamation Ordinance (2002), the Salary Board Award (2013), and Journalists' Safety Bill (2016). The newspaper reports on the types of risks and threats faced by Pakistani journalists who have covered violent armed conflicts, Journalists who had lost colleagues during the US War on Terror. The researcher also examines the role of media personnel within the framework of Social Responsibility theory and explores some of the key factors that make conflict journalism risky in Pakistan by examining the lives of journalists.

## Media Workers and Social Responsibilities

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It has always been the goal of journalists to enlighten and inform the people. They are often reminded of playing the role of watchdogs in society, protecting the rights of the general public and upholding their social responsibility. The fourth estate and guardians of the public trust are terms commonly used to describe journalists. As the 1978 UNESCO Declaration's Article 3 declares that the field of mass media can make a significant contribution to strengthening peace and international understanding and to combating racial discrimination, apartheid and war-mongering. As a result, journalists have a duty

to uphold moral principles in society. There is no such thing as an external goal enforced on the media from outside, in fact, it comes from the role given to journalists in advanced societies. As Kempf claims that it rewards media personnel with the trust advantage that society grants them; this confidence is expressed in the belief that journalists will investigate the powerful on behalf of the helpless and give a voice to the voiceless.

### **Reporting From the Line of Fire**

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As NATO forces poured more and more bombs; the murderers of humanity found no place to hide. To escape death, Taliban leadership had flocked to the Pakistani tribal areas bordering Afghanistan as a result of the long and porous border. Since 2004 and up to the present, the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan has been deeply involved in the War on Terror. These tribal lands located in Pakistan's remote northwestern region have long been hostile to foreign militaries, which also share a border with Afghanistan.

Consider the case of Hayat ullah Khan, in his early 30s, he was a passionate journalist, covering US-led drone strikes for an English daily newspaper in 2006. Hayat was the head of the FATA-based journalists. A few months after being picked up by unidentified men in early January; Hayatullah was found dead in his home town North Waziristan. His tribal clan believed he was detained by security forces for reporting about US military activities in tribal areas. Amid the US refutation of drone strikes on a tribal village, Hayatullah Khan became the first journalist to post online what was left of a drone strike. Sources claimed that because of his "independent reporting," Pakistani authorities' officials were "furious." Mr. Khan vanished after reporting that Abu Hamza Rabia, an al-Qaeda suspect, had been executed in a US airstrike and not in an accident while building a suicide bomb, as the Pakistani establishment had stated. Among hundreds of cases only one involving a US citizen, Daniel Pearl, has been thoroughly and competently investigated out of all the journalists who had

been kidnapped or killed in Pakistan since the War on Terror had begun. In another case in February 2005, militants murdered two active reporters working for a regional news agency, in the town of Wana. A similar incident occurred, after participating in a VOA radio program in December 2005; BBC World Service journalist Dilawar Khan Wazir received a bomb threat at his residence in Wana. Activists were repeatedly threatened against reporting any negative story in print or electronic media.

Malik Mumtaz, an experienced tribal reporter and head of the Miranshah Press Club, was brutally murdered, bringing attention, yet again to the dangerous working conditions that the tribal journalists have been subjected to. Malik was shot dead on the spot by unidentified gunmen in Miranshah bazar, in February 2016. He became the ninth tribal journalist to die reporting from the line of fire, raising concerns about the willingness of Pakistani authorities and media owners to defend their most vulnerable workers reporting in hostile tribal regions. The fact that no one has been able to identify the killer is not surprising in any way. Security forces and the Taliban, the two key players in tribal areas, are never satisfied with the work of tribal journalists. The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) and Amnesty International had frequently expressed their concern regarding the threats and pressure tactics that former FATA-based journalists face daily.

According to one tribal journalist, "If we publish an actual account, one or the other stakeholder turn against you, so most of us have agreed to make fabricated ambiguous stories; so as not attract wrath from any side". However, finding peace is not easy and Malik Mumtaz's death highlights the savagery of the unstable and violent region. Tribal journalists have been publishing their work in the major international press to inform the World about what is happening in Pakistan's most turbulent and hazardous terrain. Many in the media world would be shocked to learn that most local media organizations do not compensate their tribal correspondents for exceedingly risky work. Journalists who may

have dared to conduct an interview by risking their lives often provide fascinating news articles, as well as the headlines of Pakistani networks, for free.

One of the major concerns for media workers is their tough working conditions against low wages. In most cases, it is due to their bosses sitting in posh Islamabad consuming a major chunk of workers' unpaid labour. The following morning, renowned media names in the West break an exclusive story from Pakistan. However, very few people are aware that an unnamed, underpaid remote journalist endangered his life to bring you this news for just a few dollars. A senior official called reporters from the Khyber Agency in November 2012 to solicit their support for a military operation. In reality, officials instructed them about the nature of reporting which could highlight the armed forces' successes against the insurgents. During the discussion, a prominent journalist reported that "the authorities feel frustrated and angry about our reporting on civilian deaths due to shelling". Many tribal journalists have migrated in and around Peshawar as a result of the constant persecution and harassment they and their immediate families endure, according to Amnesty International. But the intelligence agencies suspect they are Taliban sympathizers and thoroughly monitor their movements in Peshawar. It goes without saying that if the Taliban spokesmen can call top media houses in Islamabad, where would the junior, underpaid tribal reporters flee? To avoid any mishap, they are compelled to portray only a portion of what is happening in the region in order to protect their lives and loved ones.

### **Freedom of Speech**

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The law of the land that is the constitution of Pakistan is an absolute farrago. Though it extends the right of freedom of speech to the people this extension remains restricted to the Book of Codes. After all, Pakistan takes pride in being the least democratic and more anarchic when it comes to governance and public policy. Obviously, everyone has a constitutional right to freedom of speech and

expression, as well as freedom of the press. But what if it is not specified what "reasonable limitations" means? When "freedom" is subjected to many reasonable limitations imposed by law. The only additional justification provided in the article is that these restrictions may be imposed for the glory of Islam or the integrity, security or defence of Pakistan or any part thereof, friendship with foreign nations, public order, decency or morality, or involving contempt of court, the commission of a crime, or the incitement to commit a crime" – the Terms and expressions are neither defined nor explained. Their interpretation and use are sometimes arbitrary and subject to personal preference. Investigative journalism against the armed forces, friendly countries or the supposed custodians of the glory of Islam poses a significant risk to journalists due to the conditions imposed by Articles 19 and 19(A), which are discussed in the section above about what went on with the journalists. It clearly reveals how all these powerful stakeholders use multiple loopholes in Pakistani laws for justifying brutality and arbitrary targeting of journalists.

### **Pakistani Media: A Cracked Pillar**

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According to a report by Reporters without Borders (RSF), 31 journalists and 3 media workers have been killed, 490 other journalists and 16 media workers have been detained Worldwide, and 86 incidents of violence against the media and those working in the media took place in Pakistan from May 2021 to November 2021. Citizens for Justice and Peace (CPJ) estimates that from 1992 to 2021, there were 2161 murders of journalists and media professionals worldwide. Pakistan achieved 157th rank in 2021 on the Freedom of Press Index. As for regulation of the media is concerned the Government authority; PEMRA, is more of a harassing tool used by the government to impose censorship on media persons and organizations. Under the disguise of protecting journalists, Pakistani law is used to suppress criticism of the government and important state institutions. The Protection of Journalists and Media

Professionals Act passed in 2021, provides for conditional protections of media professionals that force journalists to adopt specific "behaviours". PECA; passed in 2016, is used more to restrict freedom of expression online than to fight cybercrime. In terms of security, Pakistan is considered one of the most notoriously dangerous places in the world for journalists, with three to four dead journalists every year. In reality, the media and the press are equally vital as the other three pillars of the state. A vibrant, creative, and thriving country cannot be built without strong media foundations. All the pillars of the state must function independently of one another while working together to serve the country and the nation with sincerity of purpose, keeping the national interest paramount, and adhering to their assigned spheres of authority while respecting those of the other pillars and institutions.

### **For Bread alone**

While this study is underway, the current minimum wage threshold set by the federal government is twenty-five thousand per month. Even such a low threshold starts to shrink while moving from urban areas into rural and tribal sides of Pakistan. The working conditions for Pakistani journalists are termed as one of the worst in the World; next to Afghanistan. There are several cases where a news reporter works as a part-time shopkeeper or delivery boy to make ends meet. This contradiction increases as the socio-economic situation worsens.

Pakistan is a country where anarchy is disguised as democracy making it the breeding ground for the non-state actors. The efficiency of state writ is inversely proportional to the influence of the independent organization. When the economic recession and political turmoil combine; Media workers often find themselves struggling to keep up with the obligations of Journalism. A fabricated story or biased reporting may help his stove from getting cold. Still, there is the highest amount of pressure on a Pakistani media person to casing a story which is worth a few rupees. Political parties,

terrorist organizations and establishments are the ones who haunt the lives of journalists. Often times political parties accuse them of biased reporting and refuse their coverage services which was the case with Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf and Geo News. The hostility escalated to the point that both stakeholders accused each other of treachery and fascism over a live telecast. Such abnormal conditions are poison to the career of journalists. On several occasions, PTI voters harassed the reporters belonging to Geo and Jang groups. This would result in quitting jobs by media workers. On the other hand, journalists too had a bad experience with the terrorist organization. They accuse the reporters of being biased towards government and Law enforcement agencies. During military operations in former FATA, the militants would ask media workers to make a story that glorify their Jihadi cause. The issue won't end up here, a mere critical stance taken against the official narrative would be enough to make the government label that journalists as unpatriotic. These allegations would sometimes turn into the abduction and forced disappearance of media workers. Terrorist organizations were concerned for their image in the press and government spies in the disguise of Journalists. Their threats and target killing of journalists in the daylight of Islamabad had forced many to escape the country and seek asylum abroad. There are cases of journalists being held for ransom money which was a major source of income for the militants to fund their Jihadi projects. Recently, Journalists had been on the radar of the government and would eventually end up in safe houses or deserted places. It begins with threats and accusations against the concerned media person. Sometimes the media houses are pressurized to fire their employees. Such tactics are used to suppress the voice of journalists who are true to their professional dignity.

### **Conclusion**

Whether it is a prosperous or an under-developing country, Media play a significant role in politics. In times of Crisis, without

access to mass media, it is harder to obtain information because of the complexity of the politics involved and the challenges of the situation. Keeping ethics of truth and justice in a place like Pakistan, where chaos, death, and havoc rule the land; is a struggle against the tide. In peaceful democracies, the right of journalists to speak without fear is a great luxury. It would not be unfair to assume that in the case of Pakistani media professionals, their fear of losing lives, their jobs, or their loved ones could compel them to shun the trust of the masses and get off track from the right path. However, the fact that there are still journalists covering amid political unrest in Pakistan, demonstrates that the profession of journalism had evolved beyond a mere job.

Nearly half of the world's population, 3.38 billion people, or 46%, live in nations where freedom of speech is diminishing, and around 28 of these nations have repressive governments, according to the statistics by the Human Rights Outlook (2019). The study additionally revealed several high-risk countries where the security of journalists, and the privacy and safety of their sources are being curtailed. Such countries have been listed as being extremely harsh to press freedom and human rights. As for Pakistan is concerned, lawlessness persists due to the lack of democratic norms and traditions in the echelons of power. To this day, Pakistan struggles to achieve the progressive ideals of Journalism in practice and theory.

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