

Escalating violence – no respite for beleaguered journalists of Pakistan



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Acknowledgments

Freedom Network thanks the managers of its reporting hubs at press clubs and its virtual hubs for documenting the threats and attacks against journalists and Faiza Hassan, Freedom Network program coordinator, for archiving and processing the information. Freedom Network also generates monthly monitoring reports based on the same data, which are available on its website. Freedom Network has issued this annual report for the past many years. However, for the first time, the 2022-23 report separately acknowledges the threats and attacks against ‘other’ media professionals. This is because Pakistan now has two laws for the protection of journalists – a national law at the federal level and a provincial law in Sindh – that both also recognize threats to media practitioners and media professionals who may not be traditional employed journalists but are threatened or attacked due to their acts of journalism or their association with news organizations in quasi-editorial or non-editorial roles.

Disclaimer: The data used and analyzed in this report was generated by the Safety Hubs Network, which Freedom Network helped establish and manages in partnership with the National Press Club in Islamabad, Karachi Press Club, Lahore Press Club, Quetta Press Club and Peshawar Press Club, and which now includes three virtual hubs for monitoring threats against women journalists, digital journalists and media professionals belonging to religious minority communities. The hubs monitor and document threats and attacks against journalists using pre-developed templates with cases cross-verified by press clubs, journalists’ unions, media houses and journalists and/or their families. The hubs also provide intermediation assistance for victims. In serious cases, the victims are assisted through the Pakistan Journalists Safety Fund (PJSF), also managed by Freedom Network. The list of cases included and considered for analysis in this report is based on cases brought to the notice of the Safety Hubs Network. This is not necessarily an exhaustive list. The actual number of violations against journalists in Pakistan may be higher than the cases documented here. *Limitation of liability:* The list of threat actors provided in this report is based on information provided by victims, or their families, and alleged involvement of suspected threat actors cannot be independently verified either by the Safety Hubs Network or Freedom Network, therefore Freedom Network is not liable for the information.

Executive Summary

At least 140 cases of attacks and violations against media and its practitioners, including journalists and other media professionals, as well as media establishments took place in Pakistan between May 2022 and March 2023. This is a staggering two-thirds increase in the number of violations over the preceding year, when the number of cases was 86. What has remained unchanged from the previous year is a continuing trend of targeting journalists and other media professionals including women journalists and those journalists who work for digital media, according to this annual research and analysis report by Freedom Network, an award-winning Pakistan-based media rights watchdog that tracks violations against journalists and attacks on freedom of expression on an ongoing basis.

This report, released in Pakistan in 2023 to mark the World Press Freedom Day commemorated globally on May 3 every year, reveals that while state actors continue to be one of the largest threat sources for journalists and other media professionals in Pakistan, escalating political polarization in the period under review has shown that political parties have emerged as an equally unsettling threat source. It also indicates that despite a change in government in the period under review from one that was globally characterized as media-hostile to one supposedly friendlier, not only did it not make the media environment safer for media and its professionals but also it ended up creating an even more violent and riskier situation.

The data shows that almost no place in Pakistan is safe – the provinces and the federal capital remain risky regions to practice journalism. According to the key findings of the Freedom **Network Pakistan Press Freedom Report 2023**, monitored for the period May 2022 to March 2023:

Scale of violations against media in Pakistan and their frequency: At least 140 cases of attacks and violations against journalists, other media professionals and media institutions were documented in Pakistan in the 11 months between May 1, 2022, and March 31, 2023, across all territories of Pakistan. This is an average of around 13 cases of violations a month or at least one violation every three days. This is a deterioration from one every five days in the previous year.

The main types of violations against the journalists in Pakistan in the period under review are (a) 51 cases (36%) of **assault** against journalists of whom 22 sustained injuries, (b) 21 cases (15%) of attacks that resulted in **damage**

to equipment or homes of journalists or **damage to the offices** of news organizations, and (c) 14 cases (10%) of **offline or online threats** to journalists, including seven (7) instances of **death threats**. Together these three types constituted nearly two thirds of all kinds of violations.

The most dangerous regions in Pakistan for journalists, other media

professional workers and media establishments: Overall, Islamabad emerged as the riskiest and most dangerous place to practice journalism in Pakistan with 40% of the violations (56 out of total 140 cases) recorded in the federal capital. Punjab was the second worst with 25% of the violations (35 cases) and Sindh a close third at 23% (32 cases). These were followed by Khyber Pakhtunkhwa with 9% (13 cases), Balochistan with about 2% (3 cases) and Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) with 1% (1 case).

The most targeted journalism mediums in Pakistan: TV and print media in

crosshairs: Of the total attacks and violations against journalists, other media professionals and media establishments recorded in Pakistan in the period under review, the TV medium emerged as the single largest victim in terms of type of media with at least 97 (69%) of the 140 applicable cases of threats or attacks against its practitioners compared to print, radio and internet. Print media was the second most targeted medium with 26 journalists working for it targeted (19%) while 15 cases (11%) were recorded of digital media journalists targeted. There were also at least two cases of radio journalists targeted.

The biggest single-source threat actors targeting media in Pakistan: In 21% of the 140 applicable documented cases of violations against media practitioners and media establishments in Pakistan – thus the biggest single-source threat actor – in the period under review, the victims or their families suspect the involvement of **political parties** in the attacks on them compared to other influential threat actors. Equally troublingly, **state actors** and functionaries remained a close second single-source threat actor in 19% of the 140 applicable cases (at least 26 distinct separate cases). The third largest single source threat actor was **‘criminal gangs’** at 8% of the applicable 140 cases (at least 11 distinct individual cases). The remaining two threat categories are multisource categories that remain major harm sources. These include miscellaneous **‘others’** with 27% (at least 38 out of 140 applicable cases) and multisource **‘unknown’** with 24% (34 of 140 applicable cases).

Targeting women media practitioners: Women journalists, and at least one transgender woman journalist, were targeted in at least 8 of the total 140

applicable violations cases in the period under review. One woman journalist was killed during the coverage of a political rally. Women journalists reported at least one instance each of receiving threats of harm and digital threats against them. In one instance, a woman journalist was assaulted leading to injuries. It should be noted that the low number of these documented cases is due to under-reporting. Anecdotal evidence suggests that Pakistani women journalists are regularly targeted with online and offline threats and attacks, including coordinated online campaigns to malign them, harassment during news coverage, and threats of physical harm to deter them from journalism.

Digital media journalists in the crosshairs: In at least 15 of the total 140 applicable violations against journalists, other media professionals and media establishments in the period under review, the targets were journalists and other media professionals working with digital media or online news outlets.

Scale of violations against journalists, other media professionals and media institutions

At least 140 cases of threats and attacks were documented against journalists, other media professionals and media institutions in the 11 months from May 2022 to March 2023 across all territories of Pakistan, including the four provinces, Islamabad, Gilgit-Baltistan and Azad Kashmir. This is an average of around 13 cases of press freedom violations every month, or at least one violation every three days.

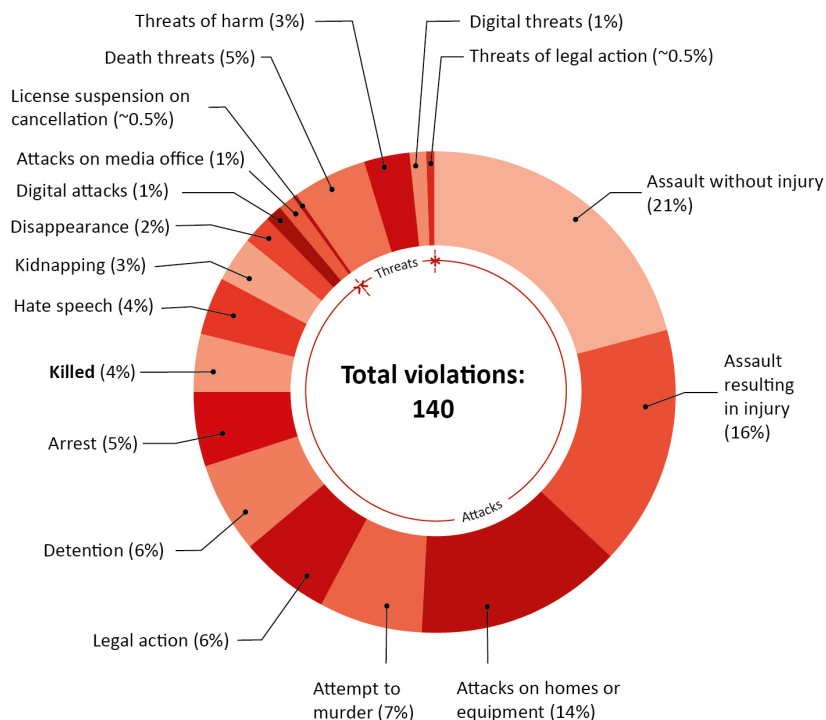
The documented violations included:

- Five (05) journalists **killed**, plus 10 unsuccessful **assassination attempts** against journalists and other media professionals
- At least nine (09) specific instances of **legal action** against journalists
- Ten (10) cases of **arrests and detentions** of journalists by the State
- Fifty-one (51) cases of **physical assault**, 22 of which caused bodily injuries
- Twenty-one (21) attacks that resulted in **damage to equipment or homes** of journalists or **damage to the offices** of news organizations
- Fourteen (14) cases of **offline or online threats** to journalists, including seven (7) instances of **death threats**
- Seven (7) cases of kidnapping or disappearance of journalists and other media professionals

Categories of violations against journalists, other media professionals and media institutions

During the reporting period, 133 cases of violations were reported against journalists, two against other media professionals (such as citizen journalists and non-editorial employees of news organizations), and five against media institutions, such as news organizations.

CATEGORIES OF VIOLATIONS - OVERALL



The overall **top categories of violations** against journalists, other media professionals and media institutions in Pakistan during the period under review were (a) 29 cases of **assault without injury** (21%), (b) 22 cases of **assault resulting in injury** (16%), (c) 19 instances of **attacks that led to damage** to the equipment, property or homes of journalists (14%), and (d) 10 **murder attempts** against journalists and other media professionals (7%).

These four categories of violations – assault, assault leading to injury, attacks leading to damages, and murder attempts – constituted around 58% of the 140 total violations recorded during the reported period.

Killings and attempted murder: At least 5 working journalists were killed for their journalism work in the period under review. The murders constituted 4% of the total 140 cases of violations against journalists, other media professionals and media institutions. At least another 10 other journalists and media professionals – around 7% of the total violations – survived assassination attempts. The overall cases of murders and attempted murders totaled 15, or around 11% of the total 140 violations.

Legal cases: At least nine cases were documented in which journalists were served with legal notices or cases registered against them for various alleged infractions, or around 6% of the 140 total cases of violations.

Assault and attacks on property and equipment: At least 51 journalists were physically assaulted in the period under review, of which 22 sustained injuries. Moreover, 19 instances of attacks on journalists or their homes that led to damage to their property and equipment were recorded. Altogether, these three categories of violations constituted exactly half (50%) of the 140 violations. Separately, two attacks on offices of media organizations were also reported.

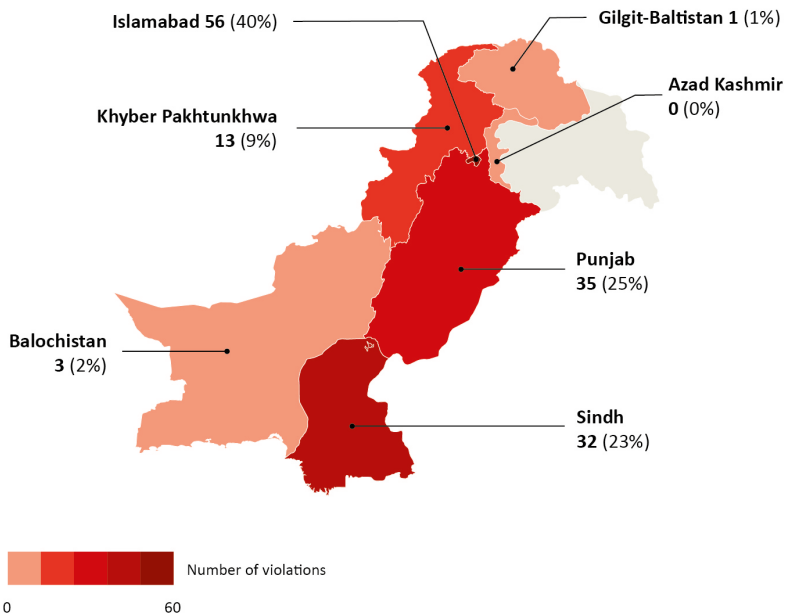
Threats: Altogether 14 cases were documented across four categories of threats against journalists. This included seven instances of death threats (5% of the total 140 violations) and at least two instances of online trolling and abuse.

Arrests or detention: At least seven journalists were arrested (under specific charges) and eight were detained by authorities without serving cause in the period under review. This adds up to a total of 15, or 11% of the total 140 violations recorded.

Kidnappings and enforced disappearances: At least four journalists and other media professionals were reportedly kidnapped during the period under review and another three journalists were forcibly disappeared. Altogether, these seven cases make up 5% of the total violations.

The most dangerous regions in Pakistan for journalists, other media professionals and media institutions

THE MOST DANGEROUS REGIONS



Note: Map regions are shaded according to absolute number of violations. Percentages in brackets are calculated out of total number of violations reported in Pakistan, 140.

Overall hostility: Overall, Islamabad emerged as the riskiest and most dangerous place to practice journalism in Pakistan, with 40% of the violations (56 out of total 140 cases) recorded in the federal capital. Punjab was the second worst with 25% of the violations (35 cases) and Sindh the third most

dangerous with 23% (32 cases). These were followed by Khyber Pakhtunkhwa with 9% (13 cases), Balochistan with about 2% (three cases) and one case from Gilgit-Baltistan.

Risk to life: In terms of fatal attacks on journalists, two journalists were killed in Punjab and one each in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Sindh and Islamabad*. No murders were reported from Azad Kashmir, Balochistan or Gilgit-Baltistan. Additionally, four journalists survived assassination attempts in Punjab, two in Islamabad, and one each in Balochistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Sindh. One media professional also escaped an attempt on their life in Gilgit-Baltistan.

**Note: Pakistani journalist Arshad Sharif was murdered in Kenya during the reporting period. However, for the sake of convenience of analysis and owing to the standard reporting template, his murder is being counted in the federal capital Islamabad, where he had lived and worked most recently before leaving Pakistan prior to his death and from where his murder investigation has so far been led under the supervision of the Supreme Court and federal authorities.*

Bodily harm: Islamabad was again the most violent region in the country for journalists documenting 30 of the total 51 cases – 59% – of assaults and assaults leading to injuries of journalists during the period under review. The second worst was Sindh with 12 cases and Punjab the third worst with seven incidents.

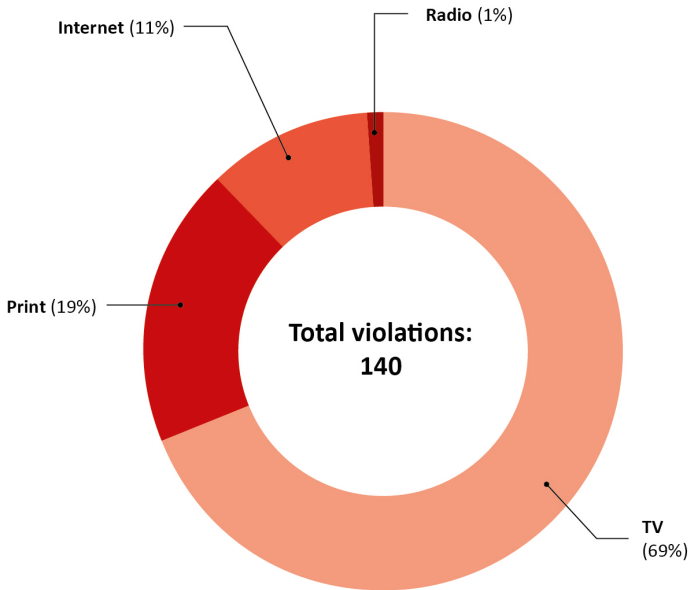
Arrests: In terms of arrests and detentions, of the total 15 cases documented, four each were documented from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Punjab, three each from Islamabad and Sindh and one from Balochistan.

Threats: Of the 14 total cases of death threats, threats of harm, threats of legal action and digital threats, such as trolling and online abuse, there were eight reported from Punjab and four from Islamabad while one each from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Sindh.

Legal: There were nine cases registered against journalists altogether, out of which Sindh had nearly half (4), Islamabad and Punjab had two each, and one legal notice was issued to a journalist in Balochistan.

The most targeted mediums in Pakistan for journalists, other media professionals and media institutions

THE MOST TARGETED MEDIUMS



In the crosshairs: Of the total 140 attacks and other violations against journalists, other media professionals and media institutions recorded in Pakistan in the period under review, TV medium emerged as the single largest victim type of media with at least 97 (69%) of the cases against its practitioners compared to print, radio and internet. Print media was the second most targeted medium with 26 media practitioners working for it targeted (19%)

while 15 cases (11%) were recorded of online journalists targeted. Two cases of radio journalists getting targeted were also documented.

Killed: Of the 5 journalists killed, 3 worked for TV media and two for print media.

Survived assassinated attempts: Of the 10 journalists and other media professionals who survived assassination attempts, 6 worked for print media, two for Internet-based digital media, and one each for TV and radio media.

Legal cases: Of the 9 journalists against whom legal cases were registered, 7 were from TV media and 2 from internet-based digital media.

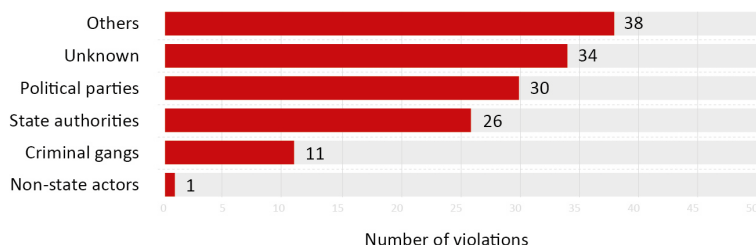
Assaulted and injured: Of the 51 journalists assaulted, 42 worked for TV media (including 15 who sustained injuries), 7 for print media (including 5 who were injured) and 2 internet-based digital media, both of whom sustained injuries.

Arrested or detained: Of the 7 journalists arrested, 5 worked for TV media and 2 for print. Of the 8 journalists detained illegally, 4 worked for print media and two each for TV media and internet-based digital media.

Kidnapped or forced disappeared: Of the 4 journalists and other media professionals kidnapped, 2 journalists kidnapped worked for TV media and one for digital media while one other media professional worked for digital media. Of the three forcibly disappeared journalists, 2 worked for TV media and one for print media.

The most vicious threat actors targeting journalists, other media professionals and media institutions in Pakistan

THE MOST VICIOUS THREAT ACTORS



DISCLAIMER: *The information included here is based on reporting by victims or their families and does not necessarily imply it is verified, unless specified. The information filed here is aimed at analyzing trends for the sole purpose of informing strategies to reduce threats against media and its practitioners.*

Political parties: The largest single-source threat actor identified by the victims, or their families, were political parties – constituting 30 of 140 cases (21%). Political parties were allegedly involved in killing one journalist, assaulting 17 journalists, spewing hate speech against 5 journalists, threatening two journalists with physical harm or legal action and attacking the equipment or assets of 4 journalists. A political party was also involved in attacking one media institution's office.

State authorities: State authorities emerged as the second largest single-source threat actor as blamed by the victim journalists or other media professionals or their families in 26 of the 140 applicable cases (19%). State functionaries were allegedly involved in assaulting 11 journalists including injuring 4, arresting or

detaining 10 journalists, kidnapping one journalist and other media professional each, threatening one journalist, raiding one media institution and suspending the license of another.

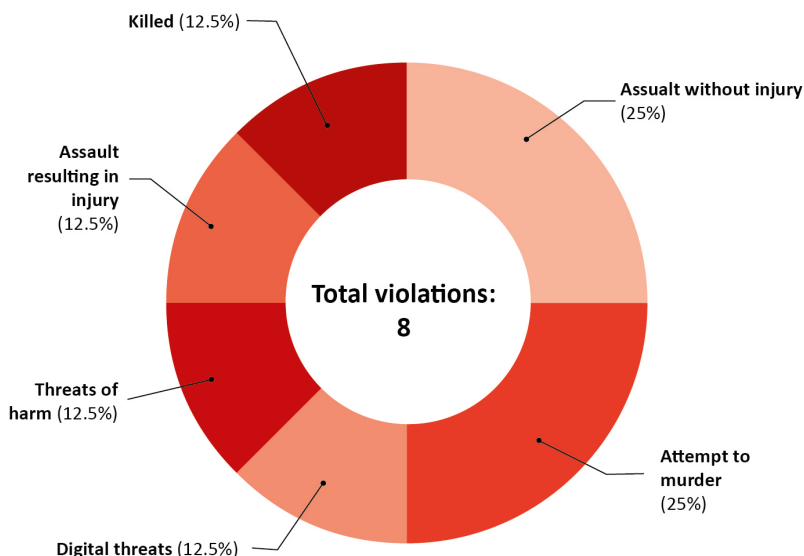
Criminal gangs: Criminal gangs emerged as the third largest single-sourced threat actor constituting 11 of 140 cases (8%). They allegedly threatened to murder one journalist, unsuccessfully attempted to murder another and kidnapped one journalist, assaulted four journalists and attacked the properties of another four journalists.

“Others”: A group of miscellaneous ‘others’ (including feudal lords, land mafia, traders, individual clerics, lawyers, etc.) were blamed by victims or their families for allegedly being behind 38 of the 140 applicable cases (27%). These included assaulting 15 journalists of which 10 sustained injuries, instituting legal actions against 7 journalists, attacking the homes, equipment or properties of another 7 journalists, detaining 5 journalists, kidnapping one journalist, giving death threats to two journalists and hurling online threats against another.

“Unknown”: The victims and their families, as well as the authorities and their employers, have been unable to identify perpetrators of violations in 34 of 140 cases (24%) against journalists, other media professionals and media institutions. These included murder of four journalists, attempt to kill another 8 journalists, threatening to murder 3 journalists and attempting to kill one other media professional, assaulting 4 journalists including injuring two, registering legal cases against two journalists, threatening to physically harm 2 journalist and hurling online threats against another, attacking homes, equipment and properties of four journalists, forced disappearance of three journalists and mounting digital attacks against two media establishments.

Threats and attacks against women journalists

THREATS AND ATTACKS AGAINST WOMEN JOURNALISTS



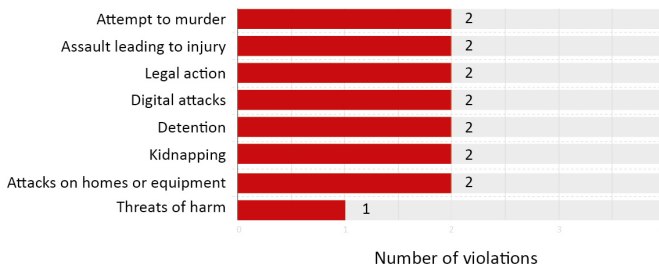
Women journalists, including a transgender woman, were targeted in at least eight of the total 140 violations against journalists, other media professionals and media institutions in the period under review. These included at least two documented cases of attempt to murder. Three instances of assault on women journalists were reported, in which at least one woman journalist was injured. One woman journalist was killed during the coverage of a political rally. Women journalists reported at least one instance each of threats of harm and digital

threats against them. It should be noted that the low number of these cases might be due to under-reporting. Anecdotal evidence suggests that Pakistani women journalists are regularly targeted with online and offline threats and attacks, including coordinated online campaigns to malign them, harassment during news coverage, and threats of physical harm to deter them from journalism.

Chapter 7

Violations against digital journalists, other online media professionals and digital media institutions

VIOLATIONS AGAINST DIGITAL JOURNALIST AND MEDIA



In at least 15 of the total 140 violations (or 11%) against journalists, other media professionals and media institutions during the period under review, the targets were either journalists and other media professionals working with digital media or online news outlets.

These 15 cases include two cases of attempted murder, one each against a journalist and a digital media professional. It should be noted that a total of 10 assassination attempts were reported altogether against journalists working for all media types, meaning digital journalists and other online media professionals were targeted with intent to kill in at least 20% of the total cases.

A quarter of all eight journalists detained during the reporting period worked for online media. Half of the four journalists and other media professionals kidnapped during the same time were associated with digital and social media.

Additionally, digital journalists faced two instances each of assaults leading to injury, legal cases and attacks that led to damage to homes or equipment. One online journalist also reported facing threats of physical harm.

Two digital media outlets faced digital attacks, such as hacking, during the reporting period.

Chapter 8

List of Pakistani journalists killed from May 2022 to March 2023

The following is a list of the five journalists killed in the period under review for, or while doing, their journalism work:

Iftikhar Ahmed, a reporter with Daily Express, was murdered on July 2, 2022, by an unidentified assailant in Shabqadar, a town in the district of Charsadda in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province.

Ishtiaq Sodhero, a contributor to the Sindhi Weekly Paper Chinag and a member of the Rajanpur Press Club, was shot and killed in front of his home in Kumb, a town in the district of Khairpur, Sindh. The motive behind his murder is unknown.

Sadaf Naeem, a television reporter working for Channel 5 died in an accident covering a political rally of the Pakistan Tehreek-e Insaf (PTI) in October 2022. She was crushed to death under the container truck on which the PTI leadership was travelling, after she slipped and fell trying to climb on to the container.

Naresh Kumar, a reporter working for a Sindhi News channel Mehran TV was killed on October 10, 2022, near Gambat, a town in district Khairpur, Sindh. He was a witness in the murder case of his journalist colleague Ajay Lalwani, who was shot dead in March 2021 in the Saleh Putt area of district Sukkur, Sindh.

Arshad Sharif, an investigative journalist and popular television talk show host from Islamabad, was shot dead in mysterious circumstances in Kenya on October 23, 2022, after he had left Pakistan due to safety and legal threats against him.

ABOUT FREEDOM NETWORK (www.fnpk.org)

Freedom Network is a Pakistan-based independent media and development sector research, advocacy and training organization registered with the Securities and Exchange Commission of Pakistan (SECP). It was established in 2013. In 2017, Freedom Network was awarded the prestigious global French Human Rights Prize 2017 by the Government of France for “its efforts for safety and protection of journalists and promotion of freedom of expression.”

OUR MISSION: To protect civil liberties, including freedom of expression and access to information, and promote an informed society that sees media as a key partner in a democratic and pluralist Pakistan.

OUR OBJECTIVES AND EXPERTISE:

- 1. To serve as a watchdog on the right to freedom of expression, including freedom of the press and Internet and of civil society**
 - a. Through 24/7 monitoring of the rights to freedom of expression, including freedom of the press and online
 - b. Through monitoring and documenting violations of freedom of expression, including Freedom of the press and Internet
 - c. Through researching the causes, symptoms and case studies of the violations of freedom of expression in all forms of media
 - d. Through monitoring violation of the right to expression of non-media sections of society such as human rights groups, development practitioners, and the performing arts industry
- 2. To promote an ethical and professional media**
 - a. By promoting, supporting and conducting advocacy, research, analysis and training initiatives for media
 - b. By promoting, supporting and conducting initiatives to help civil society strengthen its stake in a pluralistic, independent, open and professional media with emphasis on professional ethics and journalism best practices
 - c. By strengthening the interface between media and civil society by improving professional development communications within and for development sector organizations as well as for their supporters and donors.
 - d. By promoting a culture of safety and security for journalists and media houses through advocacy, research and training on issues of safety and impunity against journalists.
- 3. To serve as an advocate for freedom of expression and access to information as fundamental rights**
 - a. Through a broad range of advocacy, research and analysis initiatives
 - b. By promoting and building synergies between and among media and civil society stakeholders
 - c. By promoting citizens’ participation on issues relating to freedom of expression and access to information
 - d. By conducting assessment missions, studies, research, translations of resources in multiple languages on its own and for other organizations for wider national and international audiences