

Journalist Andy Vermaut, says that "there has been no progress in journalistic freedom & independence in Pakistan."

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Andy Vermaut

Media Freedom Day 2022, Andy Vermaut, a Belgian journalist and member of the European Federation of Journalists, is preparing a comprehensive press report on media freedom in Pakistan. "There is indeed no advancement in journalistic freedom in Pakistan," declares Andy Vermaut. "The media in Pakistan have been harassed, censored, and otherwise restricted throughout the last four years under Prime Minister Imran Khan's administration."

Andy Vermaut is passionate about Pakistan, but at the

same time very concerned. "I absolutely consider myself a friend of the Pakistani people, which is why I am really upset today by the fate of journalists in Pakistan, and I can surely say that I have quite a few friends in the Pakistani media in the European Belgian capital Brussels and in Pakistan," Andy Vermaut adds. "I'm very sorry, but I'd like to point out that in recent years, holding an opposing viewpoint has become an actual "crime" in Pakistan. Anyone who attempts to challenge the prevalent narrative of the Pakistani state in any manner will be punished in some way. Pakistan, on the other hand, is unconcerned with nuance. Unfortunately, they don't disguise it since all of this is no longer happening with the invisible hand. When I began examining Pakistan's policies in this area, I discovered that the new administration that took office in August 2018 did not, sadly, result in a change of trend in the field of media freedom. Nonetheless, I had great hopes for our cricketer, believing that he would value freedom of the press, but regrettably, the reverse has proved to be true. The attitude to the media and media freedom in Pakistan has never been more undermining than in these current times. Not only is there a suffocating climate, but there is also increasing intimidation and harassment of journalists, which is regrettably mostly coordinated by governmental players. As a result, I am disappointed that the government of Pakistan is failing in its constitutional and legal commitments, as well as failing to offer a fair level playing field for journalists. As far as I've been

able to tell, it's merely made grandiose promises. Fortunately, I was able to see through these promises and analyze the real facts. In addition to countless efforts at forced censorship, there have been several assassinations, beatings, detentions, and abductions of journalists in Pakistan. Lawsuits are also intimidating an increasing number of journalists. All of this, of course, has an influence on free speech in Pakistan, but it is also harmful to the people of Pakistan, who are therefore not informed freely and hence stay unaware of what is really going on in Pakistan. As a journalist, anybody who does not dance to the tune of the state in Pakistan would find themselves in a true nightmare. It is a repeating pattern in which critical journalists credibility is eroded, and they are often branded as traitors and ultimately demonized as enemies of the state."

Impunity

Andy Vermaut explains why Pakistan is one of the most hazardous nations for journalists: "For my study on press freedom in Pakistan, I also read through the findings of the Pakistan Human Rights Commission. They, too, claim that 2019 has already been a year of systematic persecution and that this is the year after our buddy Imran Khan was elected. Political dissent is not only growing increasingly intolerable in the nation, but the independence of the mainstream media has also taken a severe hit from the hammer, as has digital monitoring and an over-regulation of social media platforms in Pakistan. Moreover, several major Pakistani media groups concur that freedom of speech in Pakistan is being assaulted, and being undermined. It is unfortunate that the International Federation of Journalists identified Pakistan as one of the "most 'hazardous' nations in the world for the profession of journalism" in a white paper on global media, with 138 journalists slain there between 1990 and 2020. Reporters Without Borders (RSF) rated Pakistan 145th out of 180 nations in their international press freedom rating; therefore Pakistan has slipped 6 places under Imran Khan. Looking deeper, I notice that Pakistan has a high level of impunity, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists Global Impunity Index 2020,' implying that there are minimal measures to properly prosecute the perpetrators of killings and assaults on journalists. It is terrible, but a squandered chance for Imran Khan's policy team, and it is unfortunate to note that Pakistan currently ranks ninth in the world in terms of unsolved journalist killings. As a result, the world must become aware of this, and worldwide action must be taken to preserve press freedom and the physical integrity of journalists in Pakistan. "

A 40 percent increase

"I also looked at the Pakistan Press Freedom Report 2020-2021 from the Freedom Network. In Pakistan, there were at least 148 assaults and breaches against media and legal practitioners, including journalists, between May 2020 and April 2021. In comparison to the previous year (May 2019-April 2020), the number of recorded incidents of breaches has increased by 40%, showing a major rise in the environment of intimidation and harassment harming freedom of speech and access to information in the nation. According to the study produced in 2021 on the occasion of World Press Freedom Day, which is commemorated every year on May 3, numerous censorship tactics, including deaths, trials, beatings, kidnappings, detentions, and threats, have been used to put the thumbscrews on the media in Pakistan. "

Six journalists were slain in a single year.

"What amazes me, even more, is that no place in Pakistan is free from assaults on journalists and that the state and its officials are the biggest danger players, wielding the greatest stick to choke the media into submission and further quiet," says Andy Vermaut.

According to the Freedom Network's Report on Press Freedom in Pakistan 2021, which lasted from May 2020 to April 2021, the frequency and scope of media breaches in Pakistan are continuously growing. Between May 3, 2020, and April 20, 2021, at least 148 assaults and violations against journalists and media workers were documented in Pakistan, including the four provinces, Islamabad, and Azad Jammu and Kashmir. This equates to roughly 12 infractions every month, with one occurring every third day. Six journalists were slain in the line of duty, seven others were injured, five were abducted, 25 were arrested or imprisoned, 15 were beaten, and 27 were charged with crimes.

Islamabad is the most hazardous part in the city.

"From May 2020 to April 2021, there were 27 lawsuits against journalists, 26 verbal threats of murder or other severe repercussions, and at least 25 arrests or detentions by law enforcement authorities," explains Andy Vermaut. "Lawsuits, threats, and detentions accounted for over 60% of all media infractions in Pakistan during the same time period. During the study period, Islamabad was the most hazardous place to work as a journalist in Pakistan, accounting for 34% of the cases (51 out of 148). Sindh province accounted for 26% of infractions (38 cases), while Punjab accounted for 20%. (29 cases). Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (9%) (13 cases), Azad Jammu & Kashmir (AJK) (6%) (9 cases), and Balochistan were the next three (5 percent). (8 cases). Gilgit Baltistan (GB) has no documented violations (GB), but it is also difficult to examine them thoroughly since it is not an evident thing in Pakistan, and there are also numerous intimidations that go unnoticed because the media are scared to discuss this problem."

TV journalists are the most often targeted.

"The most targeted journalistic medium in Pakistan: of the 148 assaults and breaches against journalists registered in Pakistan are TV journalists. TV journalists were the major target with 79 occurrences," Andy Vermaut adds (54 percent). Print media was the second most targeted medium, with 58 journalists targeted (38 percent) and online journalists targeted in 11 occurrences (7 percent). During the research period, victims and their relatives accused the state of committing crimes against journalists in 46 percent of the 148 occurrences reported. "Of the other threateners, victims and their families, as well as authorities and employers, accused the 'unknown' category for crimes against 25 journalists (16% of incidents)," Andy Vermaut concludes.

To be continued. Andy Vermaut is now polishing his report and will provide his final Pakistan media report on World Press Freedom Day, which will be observed on May 3, 2022.

Sources:

[1. Expanding Theater of Threats against Media Practitioners in Pakistan](#) - Freedom NetWork
Pakistan Press - Freedom Report 2020-21 published on World Press Freedom Day 2021

2. [An end to fear and censorship](#)

3. Protecting freedom of expression and journalists' security - Human Rights Commission of Pakistan - Policy Brief May 2021

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