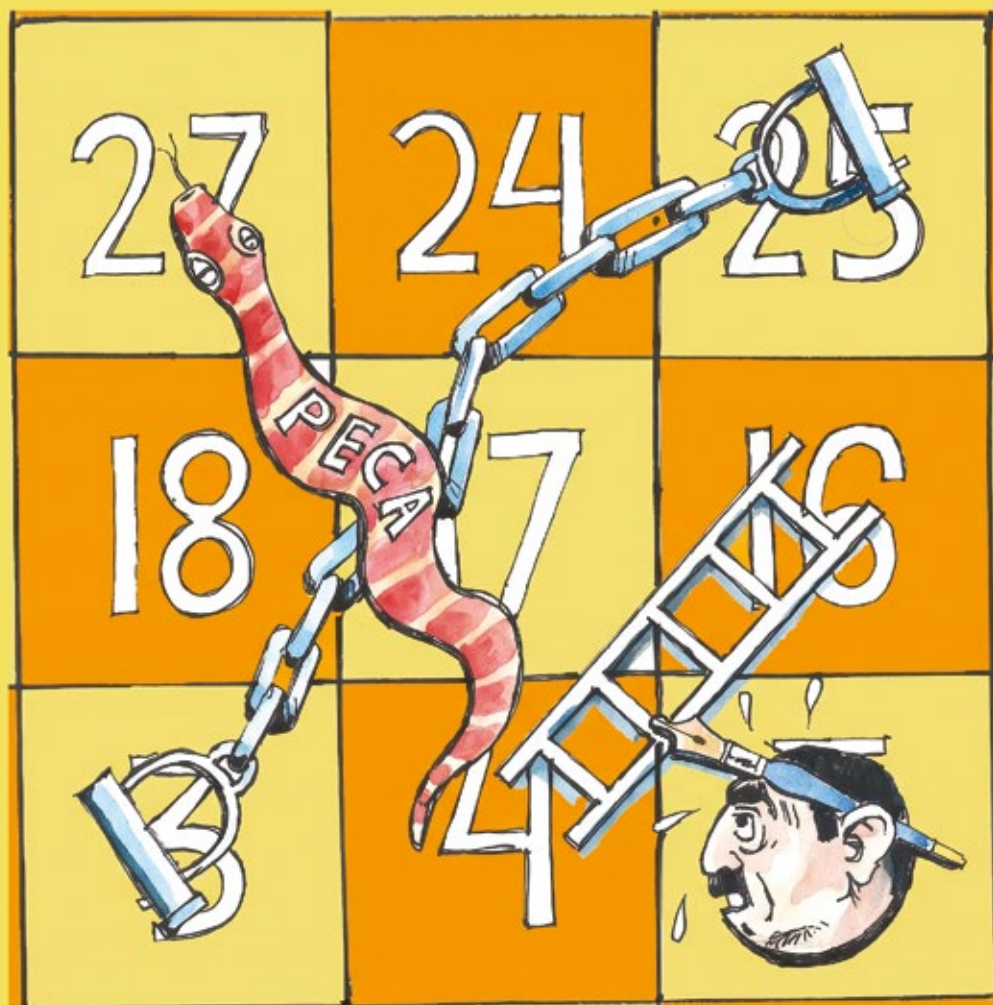


From Violence to Lawfare: Process as Punishment for Journalists



Crime and Punishment in Pakistan's Journalism World

ANNUAL IMPUNITY REPORT 2026

Adnan Rehmat and Iqbal Khattak

From Violence to Lawfare: Process as Punishment for Journalists

**CRIME AND PUNISHMENT IN
PAKISTAN'S JOURNALISM WORLD**

ANNUAL IMPUNITY REPORT 2026

Adnan Rehmat and Iqbal Khattak

Acknowledgement:

The authors of this report thank the managers of its Safety Hubs at major press clubs across Pakistan for documenting the threats and attacks against journalists and its Program Coordinator **Faiza Hassan** and **Minahil Shahab** for archiving and processing the information and drafting the testimonies. Freedom Network also generates monthly monitoring reports based on the same data, which are available on its website. Freedom Network has issued this annual impunity report for the past many years. However, for the first time, the 2022-23 report separately started acknowledging the threats and attacks against ‘other media professionals’ (‘OMPs’). 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 noneditorial roles. This report has been produced by Freedom Network (FN) with support from International Media Support (IMS). The organisations, however, do not necessarily concur with the views and analysis of the authors.

Disclaimer: The data used and analysed in this report was generated by the Safety Hubs Network, which Freedom Network with IMS assistance helped establish and manages in partnership with Lahore Press Club, Multan Press Club, Quetta Press Club, Peshawar Press Club, Gilgit Press Club (Gilgit Baltistan) and Muzaffarabad Press Club (Azad Jammu and Kashmir). 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, victims are assisted through the **Pakistan Journalists Safety Fund (PJSF)**, also managed by Freedom Network with IMS assistance. 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 or those reported in media. This is not necessarily an exhaustive list. The actual number of violations against journalists in Pakistan may be higher than the cases documented here.

Table of Contents

Executive Summary	6
Chapter 1: Trends > Impunity and the Shrinking Space for Public-Interest Journalism in Pakistan	8
Chapter 2: Data > Violations Against Media and Its Practitioners, October 2025–August 2026	13
Chapter 3: PECA > The Problem with Its Use Against Journalists, What Happens When They Are Targeted – and How to Respond.....	22
Chapter 4: Testimonies > Pressured under PECA	30
Chapter 5: Pakistan Media Impunity Index	37

Executive Summary

Pakistan remained a deeply hostile environment for journalism during 2025-26, even as the number of documented violations declined. Freedom Network verified at least 97 attacks and other violations between October 2025 and August 2026, compared with 142 in the preceding cycle. This was a 32 per cent reduction. Yet the average of roughly 10 cases a month, their nationwide spread and their severity indicated that the numerical decline did not translate into meaningful safety.

The cases included one work-related killing, three attempted assassinations, 18 threats of murder or harm, 11 assaults, 13 legal actions and 32 threats of legal action. Punjab accounted for 49 cases, or just over half of the total, followed by Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Islamabad and Balochistan. Digital and independent journalists were the most frequently targeted, while government authorities and officials were identified by victims or their families as alleged instigators in nearly two-thirds of the cases.

The report's central finding is that impunity has evolved from a failure to punish violence into a broader system of coercion. Physical attacks, threats, disappearances and opaque detentions persist, particularly for district reporters and journalists covering corruption, governance, land, crime and influential local interests. At the same time, censorship increasingly operates through regulatory pressure, informal instructions, loss of advertising, forced dismissals, restricted access to information and criminal or administrative proceedings. The resulting uncertainty encourages self-censorship and weakens public-interest reporting.

The Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) and its enforcement by the National Cyber Crime Investigation Agency (NCCIA) are central to this "legal siege." Analysis of representative PECA-related cases against journalists shows a recurring pattern from complaint, notice or inquiry to appearance, FIR, arrest, bail and eventual relief, apology or unresolved prosecution.

Allegations involving defamation, false information, harassment or reputational harm are repeatedly channelled through cybercrime procedures, including where reporting concerns public expenditure, corruption or official conduct. Even without a confirmed FIR or conviction, summonses, device scrutiny, travel, legal costs, detention, repeated hearings and reputational harm make the process itself punitive. Relief is commonly limited to bail or procedural protection rather than final vindication.

Institutional safeguards for media practitioners remain inadequate. The federal journalist protection mechanism is effectively dysfunctional, while the Sindh Commission, although more visible, has limited reach and demonstrated protection impact outside Karachi.

This report calls for operational, resourced safety bodies; clearer protections for journalism and public-interest expression in PECA; strict safeguards governing notices, arrests and device seizure; independent tracking of attacks and prosecutions; rapid legal aid, psychosocial and digital-security support; stronger employer responsibility; and enforceable accountability for both perpetrators of violence and officials who misuse legal process.

Trends > Impunity and the Shrinking Space for Public-Interest Journalism in Pakistan

Between November 2025 and September 2026, Pakistan's journalists and other media practitioners operated in a continued hostile environment characterised by physical attacks, threats, intimidation, detention, enforced or unexplained disappearances, online harassment and an expanding range of criminal and administrative proceedings. The period demonstrated that impunity in Pakistan is no longer sustained only by failures to investigate violence against journalists. It is also being reinforced by the growing use of state institutions, cybercrime procedures, regulatory powers and vaguely framed laws to penalise public-interest reporting and critical commentary.

Available monitoring data covering substantial parts of the reporting period indicates that while the overall number of individual instances of violations reduced compared to the same preceding period, the violations themselves remained both serious and widespread. Various organizations such as Freedom Network (FN) and International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) documented dozens of verified violations in this period, including a murder, assaults, death threats and other threats of harm, kidnappings or enforced disappearances and legal cases.

Violence, threats and intimidation

One noted trend was that physical violence remained an occupational hazard, particularly for district-based journalists, crime reporters and those covering local government, corruption, land disputes, law-enforcement agencies and other influential interests. Assaults, attempted kidnappings, death threats and damage to journalists' property continued alongside less visible forms of intimidation, including surveillance, obstruction of reporting, pressure on families and digital harassment. Journalists working outside the major urban centres were especially vulnerable because of their proximity to local power holders and their limited access to institutional, legal and financial support.

The pattern persisted well into the second quarter of 2026. Freedom Network recorded multiple verified threat cases between April and June, an increase over the preceding quarter. These included instances of legal action, threats of legal action, arrests, assaults, threats of harm, death threats, an attempted murder and an attempted kidnapping. State institutions were identified as a major alleged threat actor in several cases.

Disappearances and opaque detentions further deepened insecurity. In June 2026, television journalist Yasir Ayaz Khan was reported missing from Islamabad before being found in Swabi, without the authorities publicly explaining the circumstances of his disappearance. In September, journalist Muhammad Bilal Ghauri was initially reported missing and was subsequently confirmed to be in the custody of the National Cyber Crime Investigation Agency (NCCIA). He was remanded in a case under the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) concerning a vlog and social-media post. Several other journalists experienced brief detention, legal notices or unexplained custody during the same month.

From physical repression to a “legal siege”

A defining feature of the period was the increasing substitution of legal and administrative coercion for overt censorship. The 2025 amendments to the PECA law widened concern over vaguely defined offences relating to false or fabricated information. Over time PECA has become one of the most consequential instruments used against journalists, online commentators and other critical voices in Pakistan. Arrests, investigations, summons, criminal complaints and the threat of lengthy legal proceedings generated a chilling effect extending far beyond those formally accused. A representative list of such cases is presented in the next chapter of this report.

The establishment and expanding role of the NCCIA, the enforcement mechanism for PECA, further institutionalised this pressure. Its processes increasingly reached journalists working at the district level. For instance, in September 2026, three journalists in Chakwal were summoned over reports concerning complaints and a transfer dispute at a public college. The journalists maintained that their reporting was supported by official inquiries, faculty resolutions and other documentary material. The case illustrated how a dispute over the accuracy or reputational effect of public-interest reporting could trigger a cybercrime inquiry, even where less restrictive civil remedies and journalistic accountability mechanisms were available.

The consequences extended beyond imprisonment. Journalists faced repeated court appearances, legal expenses, confiscation or examination of devices, disruption of work and prolonged uncertainty. Criminal complaints were also used in combination with provisions of the Pakistan Penal Code, anti-terrorism laws and other statutes. The monitoring of media violations by Freedom Network indicated that criminal complaints had been registered against dozens of journalists and media practitioners with PECA provisions included in cases involving several of them.

Censorship and closing spaces for expression

Censorship during the period was rarely confined to explicit written bans. It operated through informal instructions, regulatory notices, pressure on editors and media owners, suspension of government advertising, restrictions on access to information, internet and platform

disruptions, fear of investigation under cybercrime laws and reported forced sackings of prominent journalists. Renowned and respected women journalists Munizae Jahangir and Farzana Ali were instances of their employers reportedly sacking them under the alleged state pressure. The blocking or temporary suspension of online channels and content, combined with the threat of prosecution for allegedly false or anti-state material, narrowed the space for investigative journalism and political commentary.

The cumulative effect was heightened self-censorship. News organisations and individual journalists across Pakistan increasingly had to assess whether coverage of powerful institutions, governance failures or controversial public issues might produce a criminal complaint, regulatory sanction or withdrawal of advertising. Digital journalists and vloggers were particularly exposed because online expression fell directly within the expanding cybercrime regime, while they often lacked the institutional backing available to established media organisations. The result was a system of censorship in which uncertainty itself became a means of control: journalists did not need to be formally banned if the probable cost of reporting was arrest, litigation or professional exclusion.

Weak implementation of right-to-information laws compounded the problem. Although federal and provincial access-to-information frameworks formally exist, resistance to disclosure, bureaucratic delay and the continued influence of official-secrecy practices restricted journalists' ability to obtain authoritative records. This created a damaging imbalance in which the state could prosecute supposedly inaccurate reporting while simultaneously withholding information that journalists required to verify official claims.

Inadequate legal aid and institutional protection

The widening use of criminal and cybercrime proceedings exposed a major gap in legal support for journalists in many places. Freelancers, district reporters, women journalists and independent digital practitioners commonly lacked access to lawyers experienced in media and cybercrime law. Even where arrests were followed by bail or cases eventually weakened, journalists and their families carried the financial and psychological costs. Legal process therefore became a punishment in itself.

Pakistan's two statutory journalist-safety mechanisms did not provide an adequate institutional counterweight. At the federal level, the protection framework established under the Protection of Journalists and Media Professionals Act remained effectively dysfunctional mainly due to a lack of resources and failed to develop into a visible, accessible and results-oriented mechanism capable of rapidly responding to attacks, arranging protection, facilitating legal assistance or publicly tracking investigations.

The Sindh Commission for the Protection of Journalists and Other Media Practitioners retained a more visible institutional presence and held meetings, including a May 2026 review of cases and its 2025 performance. However, consultations with journalists in interior Sindh by Freedom Network found limited awareness of the Commission's procedures, concern about its accessibility outside Karachi and an absence of systematic district-level documentation.

Stakeholders continued to call for stronger enforcement of the Sindh law, improved access to the Commission and greater assistance for journalists facing threats. Its limited reach, slow case outcomes and insufficiently demonstrated protection impact meant that it, too, remained substantially short of the law's promise.

Impunity against journalists as a system

Impunity during the reporting period is best understood as a system rather than simply the absence of convictions for killings and other unpunished violations. It encompassed failures to identify and prosecute perpetrators of violence; the opacity surrounding abductions and detentions; the absence of accountability for officials misusing legal powers; and the inability of safety commissions to deliver timely protection or remedies. It also included economic retaliation, regulatory overreach and the deliberate transfer of pressure from visibly coercive acts to courts, inquiries and administrative procedures.

This environment weakened public-interest journalism and deprived citizens of information concerning governance, corruption, security, rights and delivery of essential services. When attacks remain unresolved and official institutions themselves become sources of legal intimidation, journalists receive a clear message that reporting on powerful actors carries considerable risk while those responsible for threats or violence are unlikely to face consequences.

Needed: accountability to combat impunity

Reversing this deterioration requires the federal and provincial governments in Pakistan to move from declaratory support for press freedom to measurable implementation. The federal journalist-protection mechanism should be made fully operational through provision of required resources, a dedicated secretariat, an adequate budget, published complaint procedures and mandatory timelines for responding to threats. The Sindh Commission requires stronger district access, focal persons with clearly defined responsibilities, an emergency-response capacity and regular publication of anonymised case data, decisions and follow-up actions.

PECA and related criminal provisions should be reviewed to remove vague definitions and establish explicit protections for journalism, public-interest reporting, legitimate criticism and good-faith errors. Cybercrime investigations involving journalists should be subject to enhanced procedural safeguards. Arrest should be used only as a last resort, devices should not be seized without judicially authorised and narrowly framed warrants, and complaints relating primarily to reputation should ordinarily be addressed through proportionate civil or self-regulatory remedies.

An independent national mechanism should track investigations and prosecutions relating to killings, assaults, disappearances and serious threats against journalists. Prosecutors and police should receive specialised training, while unresolved cases should be reviewed by

dedicated investigation teams. Findings should be published regularly so that institutional performance can be evaluated rather than inferred from official assurances.

A sustainable legal-aid system is also essential. Government institutions, media organisations, journalist unions, press clubs and independent media-support organisations should jointly ensure rapid access to lawyers, emergency relocation, digital-security assistance, psychosocial care and support for families.

Media employers in Pakistan must also fulfil their responsibilities by providing contracts, insurance, safety training and legal representation. Impunity of crimes against media and information practitioners will begin to recede only when perpetrators expect credible investigation and punishment, public officials face consequences for legal harassment, and every journalist under threat can reach an institution capable of providing timely and practical protection.

Data > Violations Against Media and Its Practitioners, October 2025–August 2026

At least 97 cases of attacks and violations against media and its practitioners, including journalists, other media professionals and media institutions, were documented in Pakistan in the period between October 2025 and August 2026. The figure is lower than the 142 cases recorded in the previous monitoring cycle, revealing a 32 percent decrease in documented cases. While the decline is a welcome development statistically, the overall pattern of violations continued to reflect a persistently hostile environment for journalism, according to data documented and verified by Freedom Network in the period under review.

All cases included in this report were verified as related to journalism work. Incidents that could not be conclusively linked to professional activity were excluded from this dataset to maintain methodological accuracy and ensure that only journalism-related violations are counted. The findings show that the hostile climate for media, which escalated following general elections in 2024 and the passage of the Prevention of Electronic Crimes (Amendment) Act in 2025, continued into 2026, with journalists and other media professionals facing legal harassment, physical intimidation and digital threats across multiple regions.

The geographic spread of cases – including the four provinces, the federal capital, and other federally administered regions – demonstrated that risks to media practitioners and practices remained national in scope, leaving no region unscathed.

Scale: At least 97 verified cases of attacks and violations against media and its practitioners were documented in the 10 months from October 2025 to August 2026 across all territories of the country, including the four provinces, Islamabad, Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) and Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) regions.

In the period under review, a numerical decline of 45 cases was documented from the preceding year. The previous monitoring cycle averaged 14 cases per month, while the current 2025-26 period averaged 10 monthly cases, suggesting only a modest reduction in frequency and a consistently high monthly scale of violations.

Of the 97 verified cases, at least 94 cases (97%) were reported against journalists and three (3%) against media institutions, while no violations were documented against ‘other media professionals’ (OMPs), including citizen journalists and non-editorial staff of news organizations.



Categories: The documented cases in the period under review included one journalist **killed** for their journalism work, along with three unsuccessful **assassination attempts**; 18 cases of threat to **murder or harm**; 11 cases of **assault**, including eight resulting in injury; 13 cases of **legal action**, along with 32 cases of threat of legal action by either private parties or the state; and three cases of **digital threats**.

Riskiest: In the period under review, Punjab emerged as the most dangerous region for practicing journalism in Pakistan, accounting for over half of all documented cases (49 out of 97). Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) was the second riskiest region, with 19 cases (20%), followed by Islamabad, which recorded 11 cases (11%). Balochistan ranked fourth with 10 cases (10%). Sindh and AJK each posted three cases (3%), while GB was the least risky region, with two cases (2%) of the total documented violations.

Mediums: Of the 97 attacks and other violations against journalists and media institutions recorded in Pakistan in the period under review, online and independent journalists were the most targeted, with 36 cases (37%) documented against digital media practitioners. Television emerged as the second most affected medium, with 33 cases (34%), followed by print medium, which saw 27 cases (28%). No violations were recorded against radio journalists during the monitoring period.

Chronicles of violations: Key findings

Categories of media victims

In the period under review, at least 94 cases of violations were reported against journalists working in television, print, and digital media, while three cases involved media institutions – making it a total of 97 cases.

Categories of violations against journalists and media institutions

In the period under review, the top three categories of violations against journalists and media institutions in Pakistan were (i) 32 cases involving threats of legal action (33%) issued by either private parties or the state; (ii) 13 cases of specific legal action (13%) under civil or criminal law; and (iii) nine cases each involving threats to murder or threats to harm. Together, these three most frequent categories accounted for 63 cases (65%), representing over half of all documented violations.

Other categories of violations included eight cases of assault resulting in an injury (8%), seven cases of arrests following registration of a case or FIR (7%), and five incidents of detention without formal case registration (5%). There were three cases each of digital threats issued, attempted murder and manhandling (3%), and one case each involving the murder of a media person, a digital hack attempt against a media institution, an attack on office premises and censorship (1%).



The most dangerous regions for journalists and media institutions

Overall hostility: During the period under review, Punjab accounted for the highest number of violations (51%), with 49 of the 97 cases, making it the most dangerous region for journalists. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) followed with 19 cases (19%), while Islamabad recorded 11 cases. Balochistan documented 10 cases (10%), placing it fourth. Sindh and Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) each reported three cases (3%), and Gilgit-Baltistan, with two cases, remained the least affected region (2%).

Risk to life: In terms of assassination attacks on journalists, four attempts at life were verified as directly linked to journalism work, including one fatal attack and three cases in which the targeted journalists survived. Additionally, nine cases were documented in which journalists received murder threats, and nine cases in which they faced threats of non-fatal physical harm. In the period under review, the sole journalist whose murder case was verifiably linked to journalism work was from Punjab.

Assaults and bodily harm: Punjab emerged as the most physically dangerous region for journalists during the period under review, with six of the eight documented assault cases (75%), including those resulting in an injury. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and Sindh followed, each reporting one case (13%). No assaults resulting in an injury were recorded in other regions. In addition, three cases of manhandling were verified, with Punjab accounting for two (66%) and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa reporting one (33%).

Riskiest Regions

These are the regions with the highest incidence of violations against media and its practitioners.

RISKIEST REGIONS



Legal actions: At least 13 cases were registered against journalists in the period under review, with Punjab accounting for the highest share with six cases (46%). Islamabad and Balochistan each reported two cases (15% each), and Sindh, Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK), and Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) reported one case each (8% each).

The riskiest mediums for journalists in Pakistan

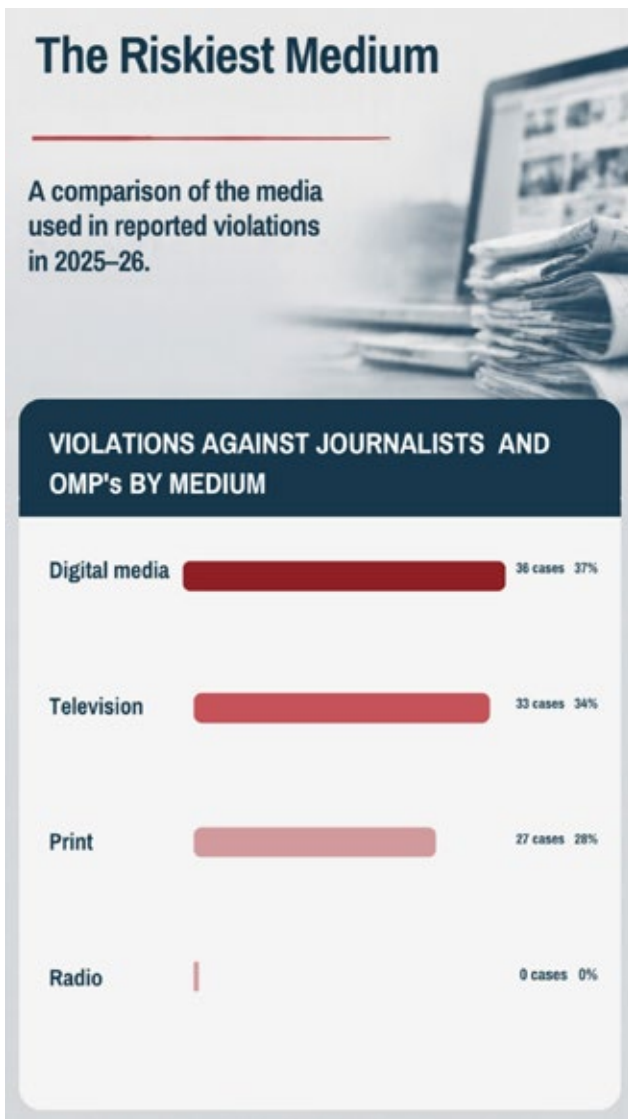
In the crosshairs: Of the total 97 attacks and violations recorded during the period under review, *digital media* practitioners were the most frequently targeted, with 36 cases (37%) documented. *Television* was the second most affected medium, with 33 cases (34%), followed by *print medium*, which recorded 27 cases (28%). No violation was recorded against radio journalists during the review period.

Killed: The sole journalist killed during the review period, whose murder was verified as linked to his journalism work, was affiliated with print media. Of the three journalists who survived assassination attempts, two worked in electronic media and one was associated with the print media sector.

Legal cases: Of the 13 journalists and media practitioners against whom legal cases were registered, nine (69%) were affiliated with digital media, while two each (15% each) worked in electronic and print media.

Assaulted and manhandled: Of the 11 journalists either assaulted or manhandled, six worked for electronic media (54%), three worked for print media (27%) and two (18%) for digital media.

Arrested or detained: Of the 12 journalists arrested under specific cases or detained without being charged, seven (58%) worked for digital media, four (33%) worked for electronic media and one (8%) worked with print media.



Threat actors targeting journalists and media institutions

Disclaimer: The information in this section is provided in good faith and is based on accounts shared by victims or their families. It should not be assumed verified unless explicitly stated. Its sole purpose is to identify patterns and inform strategies to reduce threats and attacks against the media and its practitioners, and it is not intended to defame any individual, group or institution.

Overall hostility: Among the **top three identified threat actors** targeting journalists and media institutions during the period under review, **government authorities** and their officials were implicated in 61 cases (63%), making them the most frequently reported instigators. **Miscellaneous** identified actors, including non-state groups, criminal gangs and other private individuals or groups, accounted for 24 cases (25%). **Political parties** were linked to five cases (5%), while seven cases (7%) involved unknown actors whose identities could not be established.

List of journalists killed in Pakistan during the year

This section lists the two journalists killed during the period under review, although Freedom Network was able to verify the murder of only one as being directly linked to his journalism work. Organizations that monitor killings of journalists apply different mandates, and many do not assess work-related motives, whereas Freedom Network does. In cases where a definitive link to journalism is difficult to establish, Freedom Network keeps the

Threat Actors targeting journalist and OMP's in Pakistan

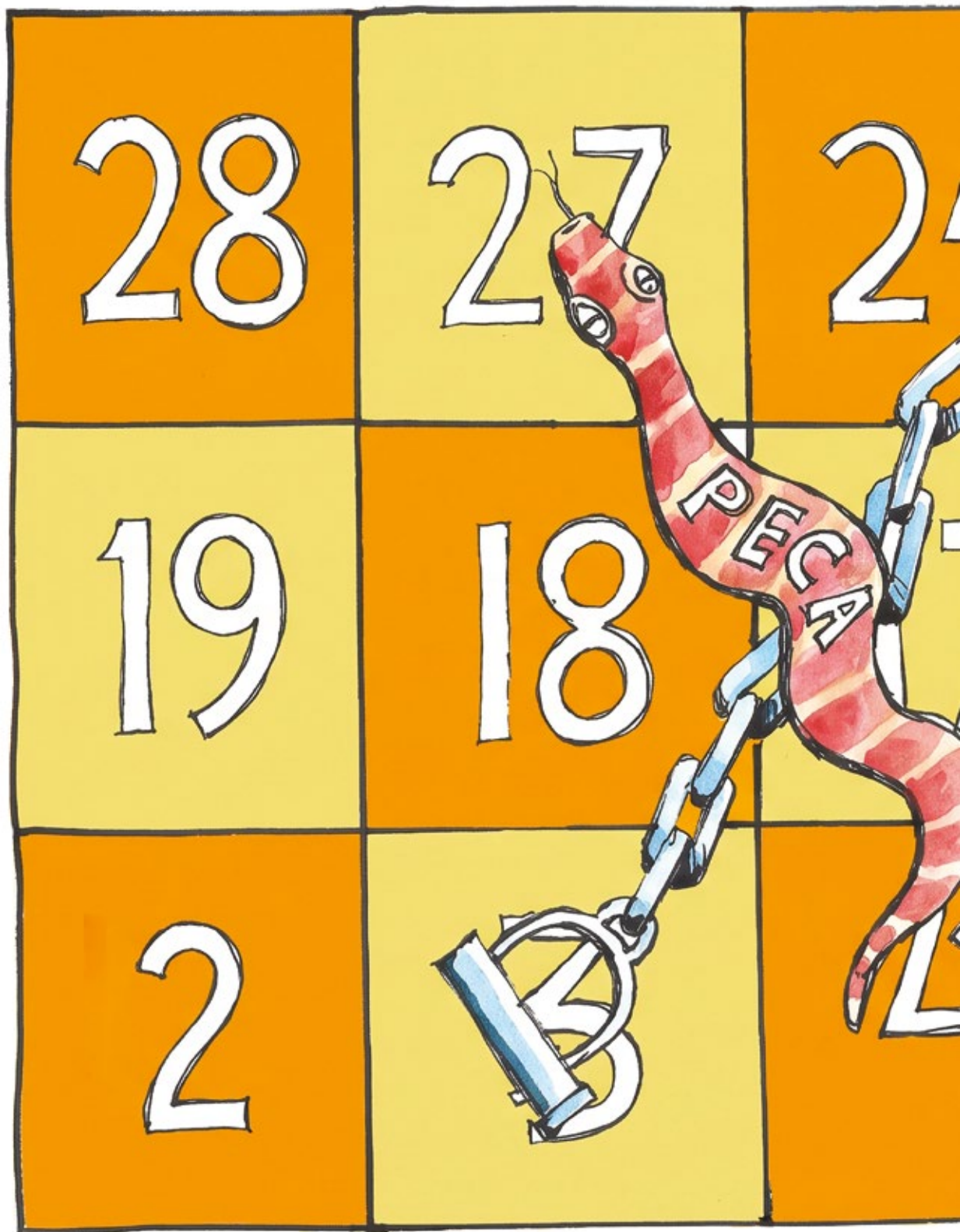
THREAT ACTORS

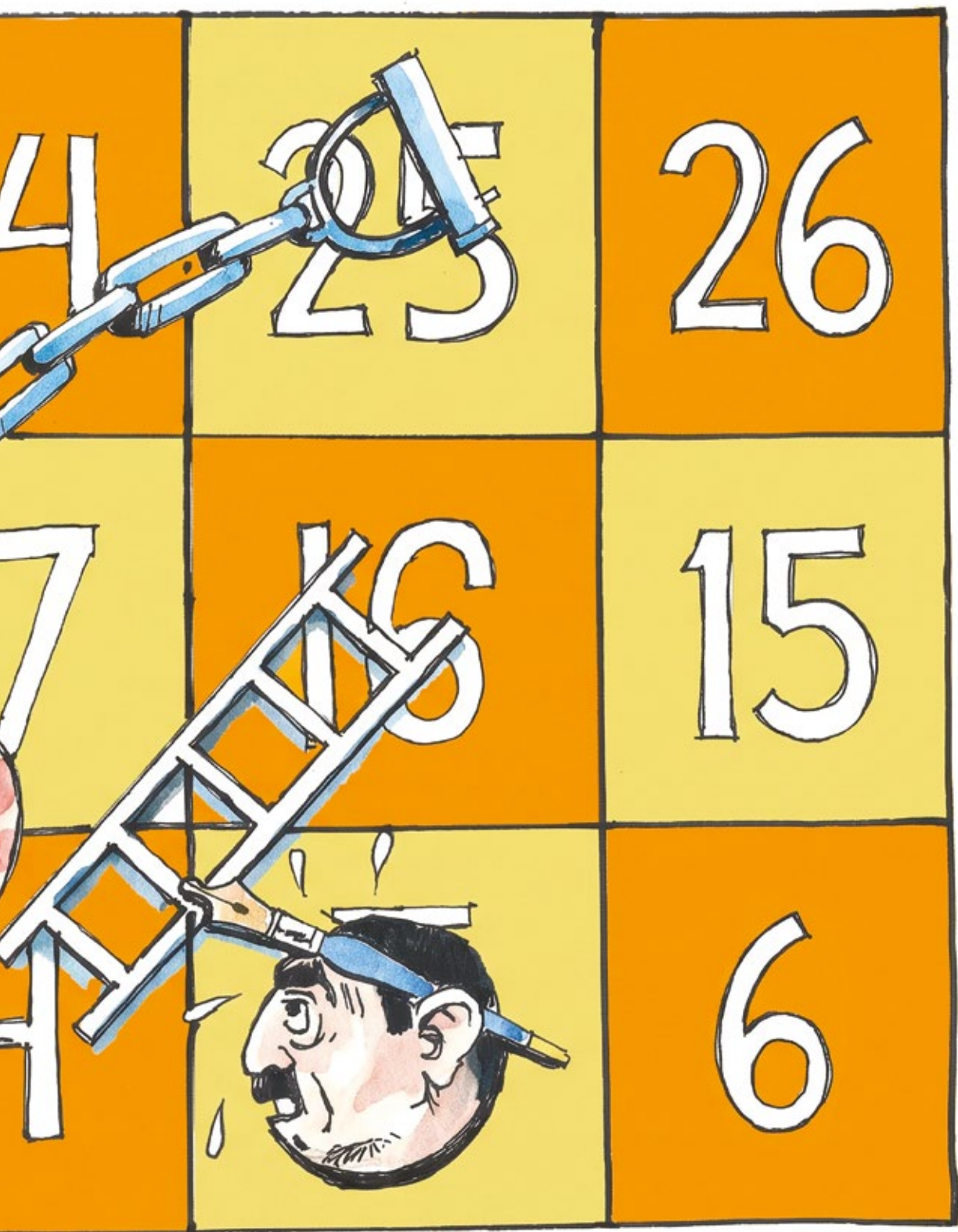
Government authorities & officials		61 cases 63%
Miscellaneous actors		24 cases 25%
Unknown actors		7 cases 7%
Political parties		5 cases 5%

matter open until its status can be resolved. Murder cases often remain complex and are not easily or quickly concluded.

Verified case: In January 2026, **Shehzad Gujjar**, a district reporter for the daily newspaper and television channel *Naya Daur*, was shot dead in Punjab's Layyah district. He was travelling with five family members when armed assailants intercepted their car and opened fire, killing the journalist and one of his brothers and injuring four other relatives. He was reportedly targeted by members of the local timber mafia in retaliation for his reporting on illegal timber operations.

Unverified case: On June 6, 2026, **Lala Israfeel**, a local correspondent for *Hum News TV*, was shot and killed in Balochistan's Musakhel district. According to his brother, Israfeel sustained multiple gunshot wounds after armed men opened fire at him as he stood outside his shop. Authorities have stated that the motive for the killing remains unconfirmed.





PECA > The Problem with Its Use Against Journalists, What Happens When They Are Targeted – and How to Respond

It is established from a public body of evidence from the past few years that the PECA law has been increasingly used by the authorities to target, harass and punish criticism and dissent, especially by journalists and other media professionals. But how do the state authorities do this and what trends can be mapped through cases to determine how to counter the state's evolving tactics in the use of PECA to professionally and personally harm victims?

Freedom Network mapped a list of representative cases of PECA victims from the media and analysed how the controversial law and its enforcement by NCCIA affect journalists and online information practitioners. The list draws on case studies and information provided by the journalists and/or their lawyers who were directly consulted for the details and status to trace the process from an NCCIA notice or inquiry through response, case registration, arrest or indictment, prosecution, bail, relief or conviction.

The cases were then compared to identify recurring and divergent patterns in law, procedure and practice; differences across regions and case outcomes; and the legal, administrative and psychological consequences for targeted journalists. The analysis also considers how journalists have responded at each stage and uses these findings to propose practical measures for addressing procedural abuse, strengthening legal and institutional support, and reducing impunity. The following are the case studies.

PECA against journalists – sample list of case studies – 2025-26

#	Journalist	Date	Region	Category	Case Details
1	Sohrab Barkat	5 Dec 2025	KP	PECA Case	A PECA-related case was registered over his social-media activity and reporting related to political and Kashmir-related issues. He had other proceedings that predate November 2025. He was arrested in November 2025 and later obtained relief in different cases.
2	Asif Iqbal	22 Dec 2025	KP	PECA Case	The case concerned social-media posts about alleged corruption in the Haripur Food Department. His posts were reportedly based on RTI documents. He was arrested by NCCIA, detained for seven days and subsequently released.

#	Journalist	Date	Region	Category	Case Details
3	Javed Khan	22 Dec 2025	KP	PECA Case	The case concerned social-media posts about alleged corruption in the Haripur Food Department. The reporting was reportedly based on RTI documents. He was arrested by NCCIA, detained for seven days and later released.
4	Muhammad Aslam Shah	29 Dec 2025	Sindh	PECA Case	A case was registered under Sections 20 and 24 of PECA over alleged defamatory/harassing Facebook and WhatsApp content. The matter concerned reporting/commentary on Karachi's water issues. He was arrested on 7 January 2026 and later granted bail.
5	Nadir Abbas Baloch	1 & 7 Jan 2026	Balochistan	NCCIA Notice	NCCIA issued two notices concerning an alleged online defamation complaint. The matter was handled as a cybercrime inquiry under the PECA framework. Available reporting does not establish a confirmed FIR during this period.
6	Awardin Mehsood	27 Jan 2026	KP	NCCIA Notice	He received an NCCIA summons concerning allegedly defamatory content published on social media. The complaint was reportedly filed by PTI MPA Asif Khan Masood. The matter was documented as an NCCIA inquiry rather than a confirmed PECA FIR.
7	Syed Zeeshan Gillani	26 Mar 2026	Punjab	PECA Cases	Four PECA cases were reportedly registered concerning a news programme about the Mall of Multan. The complainant alleged dissemination of false information. Gillani was arrested on 15 July after bail cancellation and was granted post-arrest bail on 21 July.
8	Razi Tahir	2026	Islamabad	PECA Case	He faced a PECA case under Sections 20 and 26-A concerning a social-media post about an alleged meeting involving Imran Khan. He was arrested on 23 June 2026 after pre-arrest bail was dismissed. He was released on bail on 8 July 2026.
9	Anwar Hussain Sumra	Jun 2026	Punjab	NCCIA Notice	NCCIA summoned him over alleged false claims concerning government spending on the Punjab Chief Secretary's residence. The matter related to content published during his journalistic work. He appeared before cybercrime authorities and later submitted an unconditional apology.
10	Irshad Bhatti	Jun 2026	Punjab	NCCIA Notice	He was summoned over a vlog concerning alleged government expenditure of around Rs225 million. The complaint related to allegations concerning expenditure on the Punjab Chief Secretary's residence. The matter was handled through the NCCIA/PECA framework. He later submitted an unconditional apology.

#	Journalist	Date	Region	Category	Case Details
11	Salman Haider	Jun 2026	Punjab	PECA-related Case	He was named in a cybercrime complaint concerning allegations about government expenditure. The matter was linked to allegations involving expenditure on the Punjab Chief Secretary's residence. It was dealt with through the NCCIA/PECA framework. Exact FIR details should be verified before publication.
12	Rehan Tariq	25 Jun 2026	Punjab	PECA Case	A case was registered under Section 11 PECA along with PPC Sections 153-A, 295-A and 298. It concerned a podcast involving religious/sectarian issues and allegations of hate speech. He was arrested at Lahore airport and later granted post-arrest bail in July.
13	Fayyaz Tanoli	8 Jul 2026	KP/ Islamabad	NCCIA Notice	NCCIA issued a summons in connection with an alleged online defamation complaint. The inquiry was numbered RE-1763/2026. The complaint reportedly arose from an interview and related online content. It was documented as an NCCIA inquiry rather than a confirmed FIR.
14	Muhammad Awais	16 Jul 2026	Punjab	NCCIA Complaint	A complaint was submitted to NCCIA seeking action under PECA over a video recorded during his journalistic work. At the time of reporting, the complaint was still under consideration. No confirmed FIR was identified in the available reporting.
15	Imran Shafqat	24 Jul 2026	Punjab	NCCIA Notice	NCCIA issued a notice concerning allegedly false, fabricated or malicious online content involving government institutions and public figures. The inquiry was numbered ENQ-CCRC-MTN-1549/26. It was documented as an NCCIA inquiry rather than a confirmed FIR.
16	Asad Ali Toor	28 Jul 2026	Islamabad	NCCIA Notice	NCCIA initiated an inquiry under Section 26-A PECA. The inquiry was numbered 2220/26 and a notice was issued on 29 July. He challenged the summons before the Islamabad High Court. The court directed that the allegations/details be disclosed before requiring him to appear.
17	Azaz Syed	Jul 2026	Islamabad	NCCIA Notices	He received two NCCIA notices within two days concerning content related to his journalistic/ social-media work. The action was taken through the cybercrime authority under the PECA framework. A new, confirmed PECA FIR against him during this period could not be verified.
18	Taufeeq Butt	Jun 2026	Punjab	NCCIA Notice	He received an NCCIA summons concerning a Daily Nai Baat column in which he used the term "Bureau-Corrupts" while referring to officials. The matter was treated as a cybercrime/PECA-related complaint. NCCIA directed him to appear on 19 June 2026.

NOTE: Detailed testimonies of some these PECA-related cases against journalists are provided in Chapter 4

THE PROBLEM: Criminalizing dissent – the taxonomy of PECA cases and NCCIA action against journalists

Pakistan's PECA framework, as reflected in the list of case studies, shows a pattern in which cybercrime law is increasingly used not only as a route to prosecution but also as a mechanism of pressure before a case reaches court. The process often begins with a notice, summons, inquiry or complaint by NCCIA, followed by demands for appearance, production of devices or explanation of online content, and in some cases arrest, bail proceedings, indictment, prosecution or negotiated relief. Even where no confirmed FIR is registered, the notice-and-inquiry stage itself can operate as a punitive process because it imposes legal costs, travel, uncertainty, reputational harm and psychological stress on journalists.

Procedural pressure in phases

The typical pattern has five broad stages: (i) complaint or monitoring; (ii) NCCIA notice or inquiry; (iii) appearance and response; (iv) FIR, arrest or bail proceedings; and (v) prosecution, relief, compromise, apology or conviction. The cases show that these stages do not always unfold in a linear or predictable way. Some journalists remain at the notice stage, some are arrested before meaningful disclosure of allegations, some obtain pre-arrest or post-arrest bail, and others appear to resolve the matter through apology or court intervention rather than a full trial.

Phase 1: Complaint and initiation: The process usually starts through a complainant alleging defamation, false information, harassment, hate speech, malicious content or harm to reputation. In several cases, the complainant is linked to a public official, political figure, state institution or person aggrieved by reporting. This is visible in cases concerning alleged corruption in the Haripur Food Department, commentary on Karachi's water issues, allegations about government expenditure in Punjab, and reporting or commentary involving political actors.

Phase 2: Notice and summons: The notice stage is a central pressure point. Journalists are called to appear before NCCIA, often on short timelines, and may not be given full particulars of the allegation. The Asad Ali Toor case is particularly important because the Islamabad High Court directed that allegations and details be disclosed before requiring appearance. This suggests that lack of disclosure is not merely an administrative inconvenience but a due-process concern.

Phase 3: Appearance and response: Once summoned, journalists face a strategic choice: appear and cooperate, challenge the summons in court, seek protective bail, submit written explanations, or in some cases apologise. The examples of Anwar Hussain Sumra and Irshad Bhatti indicate that unconditional apology can become a practical form of risk management, even where the underlying issue arises from journalistic work. This creates a chilling effect because legal closure may require reputational concession or self-censorship.

Phase 4: FIR, arrest and bail: In cases where inquiry escalates into a registered case, arrest frequently becomes the most coercive stage. Sohrab Barkat, Asif Iqbal, Javed Khan, Muhammad Aslam Shah, Syed Zeeshan Gillani, Razi Tahir and Rehan Tariq were all reported as arrested or detained before securing relief. The pattern suggests that bail, rather than acquittal after trial, is often the immediate meaning of “justice” for journalists: release from custody, restoration of liberty, and temporary protection from further coercive action.

Phase 5: Prosecution and relief: The available case summaries show more evidence of arrests, notices, bail and inquiries than of completed trials. This is itself a significant finding: the process appears to punish through investigation, repeated summons, travel, legal expense, detention and reputational uncertainty even before conviction. Relief tends to be procedural – bail, court direction, disclosure of allegations, or non-escalation from inquiry to FIR – rather than substantive vindication through final acquittal.

PECA PATTERN – How the journalists are procedurally intimidated

The charging process under PECA appears expansive and elastic. The allegations range from defamation and harassment to false information, hate speech, sectarian content and criticism of public expenditure. This breadth allows different kinds of journalism –investigative reporting, commentary, vlogging, podcasting, columns and social-media posts – to be brought within a cybercrime frame. The cases do not show a single type of alleged offence; rather, they show PECA being used as a procedural umbrella for many forms of public-interest expression.

Several indicative trends emerge. First, the threshold for initiating notice or inquiry appears low, particularly where journalistic content concerns public officials, public spending, political parties or state institutions. Second, notices are often used even when FIRs are not confirmed, expanding the coercive effect of PECA beyond formal prosecution. Third, defamation-type complaints are repeatedly criminalised through cybercrime procedure, despite the public-interest nature of the content in many cases. Fourth, bail is common but only after arrest or serious legal exposure, meaning relief comes after harm has already occurred.

The cases also suggest differentiated outcomes based on legal strategy, status of the complaint, court access and political sensitivity. Asad Ali Toor’s challenge before the Islamabad High Court produced a due-process safeguard requiring disclosure of allegations. Irshad Bhatti and Anwar Hussain Sumra’s matters appear to have moved toward apology-based closure. Syed Zeeshan Gillani, Razi Tahir and Rehan Tariq experienced arrest followed by post-arrest bail. Nadir Abbas Baloch, Awardin Mehsood, Fayyaz Tanoli, Imran Shafqat and Azaz Syed appear, on available information, to have remained at the inquiry or notice stage without confirmed FIRs. This unevenness points to a system where outcomes depend less on clear procedural standards and more on institutional discretion, legal capacity and the ability to obtain timely judicial intervention.

TERROR TACTICS – The NCCIA pressure toolbox

The case list used in this analysis indicates the following menu of pressure tactics that the NCCIA employs against journalists and other media practitioners:

- **Notice as punishment:** Even where no FIR is verified, the notice itself functions as a punitive instrument by compelling appearance, legal consultation, travel and public explanation.
- **Criminalisation of reputational disputes:** Several cases involve alleged defamation or reputational harm, turning disputes that may be civil, political or administrative in nature into cybercrime inquiries.
- **Vague or delayed disclosure:** The need for court intervention in the Asad Ali Toor case indicates that journalists may be summoned without sufficient prior disclosure of the precise content, complainant, legal section or allegation.
- **Arrest before adjudication:** A recurring pattern is arrest followed by bail, rather than prosecution followed by conviction. This makes detention and bail litigation the real battleground.
- **Use of multiple legal provisions:** Some cases combine PECA sections with Pakistan Penal Code provisions, expanding legal exposure and increasing pressure on the accused journalist.
- **Self-censorship through apology:** Apology-based outcomes can end immediate risk but may normalise coercive administrative power and discourage future public-interest reporting.
- **Weak distinction between journalism and alleged cybercrime:** Reporting, commentary, vlogs, podcasts and social-media posts are often treated similarly, blurring the boundary between public-interest journalism and malicious online conduct.

RISK BY REGION – The PECA application against journalists > similarities and differences

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa: KP cases in the list of case studies cluster around social-media posts, alleged corruption reporting, and notice-based inquiries involving political or administrative actors. The cases of Sohrab Barkat, Asif Iqbal, Javed Khan and Awardin Mehsood show both FIR/arrest patterns and notice-stage pressure. The Haripur Food Department cases are especially important because they reportedly involved RTI-based reporting, suggesting that documented public-interest reporting can still attract criminal process.

Punjab: Punjab has the highest concentration of cases in the case list reviewed. The pattern includes notices over alleged government expenditure, complaints linked to commentary about officials, and arrests in cases involving programmes, podcasts or public-interest allegations. Punjab cases appear more likely to involve public officials, government expenditure or institutional reputation, suggesting stronger use of PECA as a response to scrutiny of provincial governance and official conduct.

Islamabad: Islamabad cases show a different trend: higher-profile journalists and more visible judicial contestation. The Asad Ali Toor case demonstrates the possibility of High Court intervention to require disclosure of allegations. Razi Tahir's case shows arrest and bail in a politically sensitive online-expression matter. Islamabad therefore appears both as a site of coercive federal cybercrime action and as a jurisdiction where constitutional challenge may be more accessible.

Sindh and Balochistan: The Sindh example, Muhammad Aslam Shah, involves reporting/commentary on Karachi's water issues and resulted in arrest followed by bail. The Balochistan example, Nadir Abbas Baloch, appears to have remained at notice/inquiry stage without a confirmed FIR in the available reporting. These examples are fewer in number but still show the nationalisation of PECA pressure: regional journalists can face federal cybercrime mechanisms when their reporting concerns local governance, public service delivery or alleged defamation.

Cross-regional pattern: Across regions, the similarities are stronger than the differences. The common trigger is critical or inconvenient expression; the common instrument is NCCIA notice, inquiry or PECA FIR; the common immediate defence is legal representation, bail or constitutional challenge; and the common harm is not only conviction risk but the burden of process itself.

THE SOLUTION: Legal, administrative and psychological ways of dealing with PECA cases

Legal response: Journalists should seek immediate legal counsel upon receipt of notice – request full disclosure of complaint, legal sections, content complained of and complainant identity; avoid appearing without counsel in sensitive matters; preserve original reporting files, source documents, RTI records and editorial communications; and consider constitutional challenge where notices are vague, disproportionate or issued without procedural safeguards. Where arrest is possible, pre-arrest bail and protective orders should be pursued early.

Administrative response: Media organisations and journalist unions should maintain rapid-response rosters of lawyers, document every NCCIA notice and case outcome, create a standard intake form for PECA cases, track whether FIRs are actually registered, and maintain timelines from notice to appearance, arrest, bail and closure. Newsrooms should establish internal protocols for responding to cybercrime notices, including who communicates with NCCIA, how records are preserved and how public statements are issued.

Psychological response: PECA cases create fear, stigma, family pressure, reputational anxiety, uncertainty and professional isolation. Support should include confidential counselling, peer-support circles, family briefings, safety planning, digital-security advice and emergency funds for travel and legal costs. Psychological harm should be treated as part of the legal strategy, not as a secondary concern, because coercive process often aims to exhaust journalists into silence or apology.

RECOMMENDATIONS for journalists harassed or charged under PECA

Offensive PECA/MCCIA actions	Preferable response
1. NCCIA notices are used as pressure even before FIR registration.	Demand from NCCIA written disclosure of complaint, legal basis and allegedly offending content before appearance; challenge vague summons in court.
2. Alleged defamation and criticism of government officials and quarters are frequently framed as cybercrime.	Advocate clear separation between civil defamation, political criticism and genuine cybercrime > develop legal review protocols for both self and newsrooms.
3. Arrest and detention create punishment before trial.	Create rapid bail-response mechanisms, emergency legal funds and standard operating procedures for arrest-risk assessment.
4. Journalists often secure bail or procedural relief, but rarely final vindication.	Track cases to final disposal, pursue quashment where appropriate and document procedural abuse for reform advocacy.
5. Apology-based closure may reduce immediate risk but encourages self-censorship.	Use apologies only after legal assessment; journalists' unions (such as <i>Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists</i>) and assistance/legal-aid groups (such as <i>Pakistan Journalists Safety Fund</i>) should provide alternative defence options.
6. District-based journalists face weaker support systems and higher vulnerability.	Build province-level legal panels, emergency contacts and regional documentation networks linked to provincial or national journalists' bodies.
7. Psychological pressure is a major but under-documented harm.	Offer counselling, peer support, family guidance and stress-management support as part of PECA case response.
8. Policy and procedural impunity remain central problems.	Demand public reporting by NCCIA on notices, FIRs, arrests, bail outcomes and case closures; introduce independent oversight and penalties for abusive process.

Testimonies > Pressured under PECA

SEHRISH QURESHI – The use of PECA-related pressure against women journalists

For journalist Sehrish Qureshi, the case highlighted how online harassment and threats of legal action can be used to pressure women journalists and those supporting them. Qureshi, who is currently associated with the BBC, was working with *Independent Urdu* at the time of the incident and was serving as Joint Secretary of the National Press Club Islamabad.

The matter began with a dispute involving a woman journalist and her husband, who was also a journalist and worked as a crime reporter. According to Qureshi, the couple were experiencing personal and property-related disputes. The husband subsequently began posting material on different social media platforms that, according to Qureshi's account, sought to damage the woman's reputation by making allegations about her character and personal life.

In response, the woman journalist attempted to defend herself publicly. She shared photographs of her *nikah and nikah nama* in different groups to establish her marital status and respond to the allegations being circulated about her. One of the groups was the Women Journalist Caucus, a platform with more than 200 journalists from different cities, where the woman was also a member.

The dispute then extended to the National Press Club Islamabad. According to Qureshi, the woman's husband began pressuring her and two other office bearers to remove the woman from the Women Journalist Caucus group and to cancel or remove her membership of the Press Club. Qureshi said the office bearers were also pressured to delete the information the woman had shared in her defence.

Qureshi and the other two office bearers decided not to comply with the demand. She said they considered the matter particularly sensitive because it concerned the social standing and reputation of a woman journalist. In her account, the woman was sharing the material to defend herself against allegations that had already been circulated about her.

The case illustrates a broader vulnerability faced by women journalists in online spaces. In this account, personal allegations and character assassination became a means of putting pressure on a woman journalist, while attempts were also made to use institutional positions within the Press Club to isolate her. The episode demonstrates how online abuse can move beyond social media and create pressure on women's professional associations and support networks.

BILAL GHOURI: Arrested over a vlog, held for six days

Journalist and columnist Bilal Ghouri was arrested by the National Cyber Crime Investigation Agency (NCCIA) in Islamabad on the night of September 5–6, 2026, in connection with a vlog and social media post about the appointment of the National Coordinator of the National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA). Ghouri said he was taken into custody without prior notice and was not informed about the reason for his arrest at the time.

According to Ghouri, he was working at home when the electricity went out at around 12:30 a.m. on September 6. He decided to go for a walk. After walking for two to three kilometres, he noticed a heavy deployment of law-enforcement personnel, police vehicles and plain-clothes officials in the area. Initially, he assumed that the security arrangements were linked to Defence Day celebrations or the movement of an important personality.

As he returned home, a person approached him from behind, placed a hand on his shoulder and asked, “Bilal Ghouri?” After he confirmed his identity, he was taken into a vehicle. He was later transferred to another vehicle and taken to an NCCIA facility.

Ghouri said that he had undergone a dental procedure earlier that day and was experiencing severe pain but was not given an opportunity to obtain his medication. He was also concerned that his family had no information about his whereabouts. He said he had left his home for a walk after locking the lower portion of the house and carrying the keys with him, leaving his children to believe that he was still working.

He remained in the NCCIA lock-up for several hours without being presented before a court. Ghouri said he was also not informed whether a case had been registered against him. He eventually managed to attract the attention of a passerby through a partially open window of the detention facility. He asked the man to inform his wife that he was being held there. When a direct call could not be made, the passerby sent a voice message along with Ghouri’s location and photograph. The photograph subsequently circulated on social media and helped alert his family and colleagues about his detention.

Ghouri was presented before a court on September 7, 2026, with both hands handcuffed. A large number of journalists were present in court in solidarity with him. It was during the proceedings that he learned that the case related to a vlog and a social media post concerning the appointment of NACTA’s National Coordinator.

His lawyers, including Imran Shafique, Habib Han Zala and Raza Qureshi, argued that the prescribed legal process had not been followed. His sister, advocate Sabiha Ghouri, also appeared during subsequent proceedings. The defence argued that the vlog had been published on September 5 and that the case was registered on the same day, followed by his arrest. According to the defence, Ghouri should have been given an opportunity to respond to any complaint before criminal proceedings were initiated.

Ghouri told the court that his remarks had been misinterpreted. He said that references in his vlog to NACTA as a “white elephant” and a “spent cartridge” were directed at the institution and its performance, rather than at any individual. He argued that the term “white elephant” had frequently been used in public and parliamentary discourse to describe inefficient state institutions.

He also explained another statement in his vlog concerning the newly appointed NACTA National Coordinator following orders within the institutional chain of command. Ghouri said that his remarks were intended to comment on the functioning of the institution and its command structure and were not intended as a personal attack.

Despite the arguments, the court initially granted three days of physical remand and subsequently extended it for another two days. Ghouri questioned the need for physical remand, saying that the material forming the basis of the case was already publicly available and that investigators had taken possession of his mobile phone, laptop and tablet. He said investigators had also obtained passwords to his social media accounts and YouTube channel.

On September 12, after spending six days and seven nights in custody, Ghouri was sent on judicial remand and transferred to Adiala Jail. At Adiala Jail, Ghouri said he went through several stages of registration, questioning and searching before being taken to a barrack. After prison officials learned that he was a journalist, he was eventually placed in the High Security Barrack (HSB), where he said the conditions were considerably more restrictive than in ordinary barracks.

Ghouri’s arrest and detention generated concern among journalists and press freedom groups, particularly because the case arose from commentary concerning a public institution and because of the alleged failure to provide prior notice or an opportunity to respond.

AZAZ SYED – NCCIA notices and intimidation

Journalist Azaz Syed said he received a notice from the National Cyber Crime Investigation Agency (NCCIA) concerning his reporting and commentary about contracts related to the Capital Development Authority (CDA). According to Syed, the notice contained a generic allegation that he had spoken about CDA contracts but did not clearly specify what he had said or when the alleged offence had taken place.

Syed said that he had discussed the issue in an interview while referring to the development of the Defence Housing Authority (DHA) in Islamabad and had stated that Islamabad had been given DHA contracts. He said he had also discussed other related matters in his programmes.

According to Syed, the first notice was dated February 1. While he was returning from Azad Kashmir, he received a message while he was travelling regarding the notice. He said he responded that he would consult his lawyer and would provide a response after seeking legal advice. He also asked the concerned official to explain what he had done wrong.

Syed said that another notice was issued the following day, requiring him to appear before the authorities. He complied with the notice and appeared before them. He said he even told the official to arrest him if that was what the authorities intended, while asking him to explain what offence he had committed. According to Syed, he had still not received a substantive response to his questions.

Syed further described concerns about the seizure of journalists' recording equipment. He said that, apart from the possibility of arrest, journalists could also be pressured by being asked to surrender their phones or recording devices. He recalled receiving a call in which he was asked to hand over his recording device. Syed said he responded that the authorities could come and take it, adding that he was subsequently beaten.

SOHRAB BARKAT – The adverse cost of repeated PECA cases

For journalist Sohrab Barkat, obtaining bail did not always mean leaving jail. "The day my bail was argued," he recalled, investigators from another city reached the jail to arrest him in a different case. He faced repeated proceedings under the PECA law and spent approximately 100 days in detention between his arrest on 26 November 2025 and his release on 06 March 2026. Courts granted bail in two cases in December 2025, but kept him in custody in another case. "I have five cases of PECA to contest," Barkat told Freedom Network.

Authorities first arrested Barkat at Islamabad airport as he prepared to travel to Brazil to cover events connected with a United Nations climate conference. The allegations against him concerned, among other things, an interview with an opposition activist and his online reporting. Barkat questioned why he faced arrest for a guest's political statements. "The one who has given the statement was not arrested, but I was arrested because (they said) it was your interview." He said another case treated a third person's post as his responsibility because he had allegedly advised that person to publish it.

Barkat's account captures the pressure created when one allegation follows another before a journalist can regain his freedom. "Just on the basis of apprehension, another FIR was filed against me and I was arrested," he said, describing a complaint that he understood to concern reporting he might do in the future. His description of that allegation requires confirmation against the FIR, but the wider sequence is clear. Multiple cases and successive bail proceedings prolonged his detention without a conviction.

His March release did not end the cycle. Authorities arrested him again on 5 June over reporting on protests in Pakistan-administered Kashmir, and he secured bail on 15 June. Barkat's experience shows how repeated PECA proceedings can make the legal process itself punitive. A journalist may win bail in one case yet remain detained, or return to reporting while facing the prospect of another arrest.

MAQBOOL JAFAR – Repeated NCCIA proceedings

Legal pressure on journalist Maqbool Jafar began with his reporting on a scholarship and technical training programme for children of workers in Balochistan. His reporting questioned the selection of students, the facilities provided to them after their arrival in Islamabad and the money spent on the programme. He also raised questions about how a large number of students had been allocated to a single organisation and whether a transparent tender or evaluation process had been followed.

The issue had been under discussion for approximately two to two-and-a-half years before an FIR was registered against him. Jafar was initially issued a notice by the National Cyber Crime Investigation Agency (NCCIA). He appeared before the agency, responded to its questions and submitted documents relating to his reporting. According to Jafar, he was told that his response and supporting material had been placed on record and that there was no further issue at that stage.

The situation changed when an FIR was subsequently registered. Jafar said that two further FIRs were also registered in connection with other applications. He said he had not received prior notice in those matters and only became aware of the cases after he was already in custody. His account of the proceedings illustrates how a journalist who had initially responded to an investigation later found himself facing multiple cases and arrest.

Jafar said he was arrested without prior notice when personnel arrived at his home at approximately 3:30 a.m. He recalled a large number of vehicles outside the house and said that the personnel had covered their faces and repeatedly struck the door before taking him away. He described the manner of his arrest as resembling the way security personnel deal with terrorism suspects. His description of the arrest is based on his account and would require independent verification against official records.

The arrest was not, he said, his first experience of being taken into custody. Jafar also described an earlier incident in which he said he was picked up and disappeared. According to him, his brother and two cousins were also taken into custody while family members were attempting to locate him. He said the experience, together with the subsequent legal proceedings, placed considerable pressure on his family.

After his arrest, Jafar said he was called once to provide his response but was not subsequently subjected to extensive questioning. The matter then proceeded through the registration of FIRs and court proceedings. He was eventually granted bail, but the cases remained pending. Jafar said challans were submitted after considerable delay and that he continued to fear the possibility of further cases being registered against him.

The legal proceedings have had consequences beyond the courtroom. At the time of the interview, Jafar said he was living underground and had stopped appearing publicly because of concerns about further arrest or legal action. This significantly disrupted his work. He said

he was unable to continue journalism normally and that the uncertainty surrounding the cases had affected his professional life.

For Jafar, the pressure has also extended to his family. He said the earlier disappearance of his relatives, combined with the uncertainty surrounding his own cases, had created considerable stress at home. He viewed the proceedings in the broader context of his reporting on human rights and alleged corruption in Balochistan and believed that this reporting had contributed to the legal and security pressure he experienced. This remains Jafar's account and was not independently corroborated in the interview materials.

At the time of the interview, there was no reported conviction or acquittal in the cases. Jafar had responded to the initial NCCIA notice, submitted supporting documents, faced multiple FIRs, been arrested without prior notice and subsequently secured bail. With the cases still pending and the possibility of further proceedings weighing on him, the legal process had already altered both his professional and personal life. His experience illustrates how repeated legal proceedings, even before a case reaches a final judgment, can disrupt a journalist's ability to work and create prolonged uncertainty for the journalist and their family.

IRFAN KHAN – The legal and financial pressure of NCCIA proceedings

For journalist Irfan Khan, legal pressure followed his reporting on allegations involving government departments and officials in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. A Peshawar-based journalist with around 16 years of experience, Khan has worked across print, television and digital media. He previously served as Chief Reporter at *Mashriq* newspaper and hosted a current affairs programme at *Mashriq TV*. For the past four to five years, he has primarily worked in digital media.

Khan received two separate notices from the National Cyber Crime Investigation Agency (NCCIA) in connection with his journalistic reporting and social media activity. The first followed a complaint by the Establishment Department and concerned a tweet and news story in which Khan reported allegations that money was being demanded in connection with the posting and transfer of bureaucrats in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. According to Khan, the Establishment Department was relevant because it was responsible for postings and transfers at the time.

After receiving the notice, Khan appeared before the NCCIA office in Peshawar. He was provided with a questionnaire containing approximately 21 questions, which he completed and submitted. He subsequently appeared before the agency and provided his response. Khan said he has not received any further communication from the NCCIA in relation to the matter, which remained pending at the time of the interview.

A second notice followed in connection with another report involving a government department. The Planning and Development Department was named as the complainant.

Khan said the matter concerned a story he published about allegations raised by contractors in Peshawar. The contractors had held a meeting and issued a press release alleging that the Director General of Monitoring and Evaluation was demanding money from them and that their funds were being withheld or delayed. Khan reported the allegations in his story.

Unlike the first matter, Khan did not appear before the NCCIA in response to the second notice. Instead, he challenged the notice before the Peshawar High Court. The court granted him interim relief, summoned NCCIA officials and directed the agency to produce the relevant record. According to Khan, the case remained pending before the High Court at the time of the interview.

The proceedings did not result in an arrest or, according to the interview, the registration of an FIR or framing of formal charges against Khan in either matter. There was also no reported conviction or acquittal. Nevertheless, responding to the notices and challenging the second proceeding in court created a legal and financial burden.

For Khan, the most direct impact was financial rather than personal distress. He hired lawyers to represent him before the Peshawar High Court and said that approximately three to four hearings had taken place. The legal expenses were paid from his own pocket. He said neither his organisation nor the Peshawar Press Club or Khyber Union of Journalists had provided financial assistance for his legal representation.

Khan's experience illustrates how the legal process itself can create costs for journalists even where proceedings do not result in arrest or criminal conviction. Two NCCIA notices required him to respond to investigations, while the second eventually led him to seek relief from the High Court. His case demonstrates the additional legal and financial pressure that can accompany reporting on allegations involving government officials, bureaucratic practices and public-sector departments.

Pakistan Media Impunity Index

Pakistan was among the first countries in the world to introduce specific legislation on the safety of journalists, beginning with the Sindh Protection of Journalists and Other Media Practitioners Act, 2021, followed by the Protection of Journalists and Other Media Professionals Act, 2021, at the federal level. These legislative milestones followed the United Nations' adoption of the UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity in 2012. Pakistan was among the five pilot countries identified for implementation of the Plan and the federal government of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif endorsed it in 2013.

The enactment of these laws followed sustained advocacy by multiple stakeholders, led primarily by the Pakistan Journalists Safety Coalition (PJSC), a broad-based national alliance facilitated by Freedom Network with support from International Media Support (IMS). The coalition brings together media organisations, journalists, civil society, political parties and human rights groups to advance legal and institutional measures for protecting journalists and other media practitioners from threats, intimidation, attacks and other forms of harm.

Pakistan's federal structure allows the federal government and provincial legislatures to enact legislation addressing the safety of journalists within their respective jurisdictions. This framework provides the basis for the federal government, all four provinces, and the two regions of Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) and Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) to adopt appropriate legislative and institutional measures.

Despite the initial progress at the federal level and in Sindh, the development of comprehensive journalist safety frameworks remains uneven. The other provinces and regions have yet to enact dedicated legislation. Meanwhile, progress in implementing the existing laws, establishing functional protection mechanisms and ensuring that journalists can access effective remedies remains an important concern.

The Pakistan Media Impunity Index, developed by Freedom Network in collaboration with IMS, provides a standardised framework for assessing progress in addressing impunity for crimes against journalists and other media professionals. First published in 2024, the Index is intended to support evidence-based monitoring of government commitments, legislative developments and institutional implementation at the federal and provincial levels, as well as in AJK and GB.

The 2026 assessment examines developments during the current reporting period, from November 2025 to September 2026. It uses ten indicators grouped under three areas: policy-related actions, legislation-related actions and operational actions. Each indicator is assessed

on a binary basis, with one point awarded for a 'Yes' and zero for a 'No', producing a maximum possible score of 10 for each jurisdiction.

The assessment examines progress in endorsing relevant international commitments, undertaking stakeholder consultations, developing and advancing journalist safety legislation, incorporating gender diversity into the composition of safety commissions, notifying commission appointments and operationalising these bodies through appropriate administrative, staffing, budgetary and procedural arrangements.

The Index also provides a comparative basis for examining progress against the previous assessment. Changes in scores should be interpreted in the context of developments during the reporting period, including any changes in legislation, institutional arrangements and implementation. The existence of a law alone does not necessarily demonstrate that effective protection mechanisms are accessible to journalists or that perpetrators of crimes against them are held accountable.

Information limitations: Freedom Network submitted requests for information through its Safety Hub Coordinators to the relevant provincial and federal information departments and to the authorities in Gilgit-Baltistan. Azad Jammu and Kashmir was inaccessible due to political unrest in the summer and fall of 2026. However, none of the federal or provincial departments provided the requested information. Consequently, the assessment must be read in light of these information gaps. Where official responses were unavailable, findings should be supported by independently verifiable records and other available evidence, and the absence of a response should not, on its own, be treated as proof that an action did not take place.

The 2026 Index, therefore, serves both as a comparative monitoring instrument and as a means of identifying gaps requiring further government action. Its findings are intended to inform advocacy for the enactment of comprehensive journalist safety laws, the effective implementation of existing legislation, the establishment of functional protection mechanisms and stronger accountability for crimes against journalists across Pakistan.

Annexure I

Pakistan Media Impunity Index – 2025 score (Maximum score: 10; 0 for each 'No', 1 for each 'Yes')

Indicators	AJK	Balochistan	GB	Federal	KP	Punjab	Sindh
A. Policy Related Actions							
1. UN Plan of Action endorsement (either formally or in policy/ legislation) so far	N	N	N	Y (past)	N	N	Y (past)
2. SDG 16.10.1 related commitment or action (inc. reporting) by the state / stakeholders so far	N	N	N	Y (past)	Y (past)	N	N
B. Legislation Related Actions							
3. Consultations (inc. by PJSC) with stakeholders (political parties, govt, civil society, unions, press clubs, etc.) in 2025	N	N	N	N	Y	Y	N
4. Production of a draft safety law so far	N	N	N	Y (past)	N	N	Y (past)
5. Discussion of draft/issue by relevant committees of assemblies/parliament so far	N	N	N	Y (past)	N	N	Y
6. Tabling of bill relevant legislature so far	N	N	N	Y (past)	N	N	Y (past)
7. Passage of law so far	N	N	N	Y (past)	N	N	Y (past)
8. Gender diversity in composition of the Commission under the law	N	N	N	Y	N	N	Y
C. Operational Related Actions							
9. Notification of safety commission / appointments of chairperson and members (in case law is passed) so far	N	N	N	Y	N	N	Y
10. Operationalization of Commission including office, staff, budget, rules of business, etc. (in case law is passed) so far	N	N	N	Y	N	N	Y
2026 RATING	0/10	0/10	0/10	9/10	2/10	1/10	8/10
2025 RATING	1/10	1/10	2/10	9/10	2/10	1/10	9/10

ABOUT FREEDOM NETWORK

Freedom Network is Islamabad-based independent media watchdog and development sector research, advocacy and training organization. It was established in 2013.

In 2017, Freedom Network was awarded the prestigious French Republic's "Human Rights Prize" 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.

www.fnpk.org

info@fnpk.org