

Pakistan: Protect democratic space for dissent and expression to ensure free and fair elections

(Kathmandu/Bangkok, 27 June 2018) - The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) is deeply concerned over the shrinking democratic space for free expression and dissent in Pakistan. There is an intensifying crackdown on activists, journalists, human rights defenders, and the civil society, following the announcement of the election dates. FORUM-ASIA urges Pakistani authorities to ensure that in the time leading up to the general elections, the human rights of citizens are respected and protected, with special emphasis on free expression, a prerequisite for free and fair elections.

The general elections of Pakistan are scheduled to be held on 25 July 2018. However, in the wake of the announcement of the election date, there have been alarming reports of increased suppression of the freedom of expression, arbitrary arrests, attacks, threats and intimidation of journalists and activists.

On 21 June, the home of journalist and activist Marvi Sirmed in Islamabad, was ransacked and burgled.¹ Laptops, phones, passports of her family members and other travel documents were stolen. Surprisingly, her jewels and valuables were left untouched. The incident was likely an attempt at intimidation, and adds to concerns over flagrant targeting of individuals and institutions who are critical of the State.

Earlier, on 6 June, British-Pakistani columnist, activist, and a well-known critic of the Pakistani military Gul Bukhari was abducted en-route to a television news station, and detained for hours.² A day before, at a press conference, the military spokesperson complained about social media users criticising the State, and highlighted their accounts. This blatant targeting of activists, and the invasion of privacy of citizens who are merely exercising their freedom of expression is extremely concerning.

In addition to these attacks, another trend of suppressing freedom of the press has come in the form of disrupting the circulation of newspapers. Freedom of the press is guaranteed under Article 19(A) of the Constitution of Pakistan. However, the distribution of Pakistan's oldest newspaper, Dawn was disrupted, by stopping hawkers and sales agents from delivering newspapers through harassment, threats and physical coercion. Over recent weeks, similar pressure was applied to Geo TV. In April 2018, there was an arbitrary suspension of their distribution as well.³

A recent four-month investigation by Amnesty International⁴ also reveals that a targeted campaign of digital attacks is underway in Pakistan to threaten and intimidate human rights defenders. Their phones, computers, and social media accounts are being infected with spyware, and their personal information is leaked online. Since their inception in January 2018, members of the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM),

¹ <https://www.dawn.com/news/1415427>

² <https://www.dawn.com/news/1412220>

³ <https://cpj.org/2018/04/cpj-calls-for-full-access-to-geo-tv-to-be-restored.php>

⁴ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/05/pakistan-campaign-of-hacking-spyware-and-surveillance-targets-human-rights-defenders/>

are being targeted by both the military and militants. PTM is a group of activists in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) region of Pakistan, which is protesting for the clearance of landmines in the area, multiple military check posts, and for the recovery of the persons who went missing during military operations.⁵ On 22 April 2018, the police arrested several PTM leaders and activists before a planned protest in Lahore. Then, in May 2018, Pakistani police registered cases against over 150 PTMs activists on charges of sedition and terror.

On 6 June, 2018, 37 activists of PTM, including several students were detained and charged with sedition. They were calling for an end to extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances and human rights violations in FATA. They are housed in an overcrowded prison and bail has been denied while their cases are referred to an anti-terrorism court. The actions undertaken by the Pakistani authorities against these ethnic rights activists, and blatant disregard of their human rights is gravely concerning.

The Government of Pakistan has an obligation under the Constitution and international treaties it has ratified to guarantee the right to freedom of expression, including freedom of the press, and other fundamental freedoms at all times.

FORUM-ASIA condemns the attacks on peaceful dissent and citizen's right to liberty, free expression and political participation for free and fair elections. FORUM-ASIA urges the Government of Pakistan to formulate immediate enabling measures for free and fair elections and the protection of right to free expression.

About FORUM-ASIA:

FORUM-ASIA is a regional human rights group with 58 member organisations in 19 countries across Asia. FORUM-ASIA has offices in Bangkok, Jakarta, Geneva and Kathmandu. FORUM-ASIA addresses key areas of human rights violations in the region, including freedoms of expression, assembly and association, human rights defenders, and democratisation.

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⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/13/world/asia/pakistan-karachi-pashtun.html>