

‘Worse day by day’: journalists speak out after Pakistani vlogger tortured

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As Imran Khan’s government moves to outlaw virtually any criticism, media figures fear ‘darkest era’ of press freedom

Gathered before a solemn crowd, Hamid Mir, one of Pakistan’s best-known journalists, spoke defiantly. “Do not ever enter the homes of journalists again,” he said. “We don’t have tanks or guns like you, but we can tell the people of [Pakistan](#) about the stories that emerge from inside your homes.”

Mir may have been addressing journalists [in Islamabad on Friday](#), but his words were not directed at them; they were a clear message to Pakistan’s all-powerful military establishment.

Days before, attackers had barged into the home of YouTube journalist Asad Toor, [whose videos](#) are critical of the ruling elite. They tied him up and tortured him, but not before allegedly introducing themselves as officers from the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), the shadowy security arm of the military.

“I was told that the army and ISI were not happy with my journalism,” says Toor after the attack. “While torturing me, they asked me why I had named ISI and the army in my reporting.”

The Pakistan authorities have denied all involvement and claimed Toor staged the attack in order to seek political asylum abroad. On Tuesday, the Federal Investigation Agency filed a case against Toor for “defamation” of a government institution.

“There is no space for freedom of speech and dissent,” says Toor. “If one criticises the military and [Imran Khan](#), they face physical and online attacks. The level of frustration has rocketed. They can’t tolerate criticism by journalists.”

In response to the attack, Mir was among a group of journalists who had gathered to voice their anger at the increasing violence, intimidation and censorship of journalists who have dared to [criticise Khan’s government](#).

“They have even shared the contact number of my daughter on WhatsApp and asked others to threaten her” - Hamid Mir, journalist

Mir’s speech, which was directed at the military without mentioning it by name, went viral. But on Monday, Mir was told that his popular chatshow, which has been running for two decades, was to be pulled from the news channel Geo TV. The last time this happened to Mir was in 2007, when military leader Pervez Musharraf, then president of Pakistan, declared a state of emergency and suspended the constitution.

Mir is no stranger to intimidation for his reporting: he still has two bullets in his body from [an](#)

[assassination attempt in 2014](#) in 2014. But Mir says that press freedom has deteriorated to one of the lowest points he has experienced in his decades-long career.

“They have gone so low,” says Mir, who would not directly name the military or ISI. “They have even shared the contact number of my daughter on WhatsApp and asked others to threaten her. She is just a student. She is now getting threatening and intimidating messages.”

The decision to pull Mir’s show was condemned by many, [including Amnesty International](#), which said it further undermined any protection of free speech “in an already repressive environment”.

“Censorship, harassment and physical violence must not be the price journalists pay to do their jobs,” said Amnesty.

Since Khan came to power in 2018 with the backing of the military, journalists and civil rights groups have spoken out against a [steady erosion of press freedom](#). Violent attacks on journalists are on the rise. In April, a [senior Pakistani journalist was shot](#) and wounded in Islamabad, believed to have been targeted because of his reporting.

The military now routinely issues threats to ensure news stories which are negative about the military or Khan’s government are pulled, critical journalists are fired and no coverage is given to opposition politicians and rallies.

According to the International Federation of Journalists, Pakistan is the world’s [fifth most dangerous](#) country for journalists. In its 2020 world press freedom index, Reporters Without Borders [ranked Pakistan 145th](#) out of 180 countries.

The assault on the media in Pakistan is now about to become law, as the president, Arif Alvi, introduces some of the most draconian censorship seen in years, including an almost blanket ban on negative coverage of the government or the military.

Under these rules, existing press freedom laws will be repealed and a new authority granted power to inspect and raid any news organisation, summon any journalist for investigation and cancel the licence of a media network. Even journalists broadcasting over YouTube would need a licence.

The ordinance also states that TV news anchors cannot broadcast views which are “prejudicial to the ideology of Pakistan or sovereignty, integrity or security of Pakistan” and that no coverage can be given to any story which “defames or brings into ridicule the head of state, or members of the armed forces, or legislative or judicial organs of the state”.

Shahzada Zulfiqar, president of the Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists, describes the new regulation as “media martial law. We are entering into the worst and darkest era of media freedom. In this era there is a lack of safety for journalists both in their career and in their life.

“It is getting worse day by day. Journalists don’t feel safe here.”

Hannah Ellis-Petersen

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The Guardian

<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/jun/02/hamid-mir-journalists-speak-out-after-pakistani-vlogger-asad-toor-tortured>