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Pakistan's Censorship Takes a Dangerous Turn

Pakistan is silencing discussion on a growing number of topics, from religious extremism to CPEC.

By Umer Ali
February 07, 2017

Renowned Pakistani poet, social activist and academic Salman Haider was abducted on January 6 from Islamabad Highway while he was on his way back home. His wife received a text from his own number, telling her to pick the car from a place few hundred meters away from their house. As the news about his abduction emerged in the mainstream media, the families of two other bloggers, Aasim Saeed and Ahmed Waqas Goraya, reported to the police that they had been missing since January 4. Two other activists, Ahmed Raza Naseer and Samar Abbas, also went missing in the following days. All of them are well-known for holding a progressive worldview, often critical of the military's policies.

After weeks of speculation and widespread protests across the country, four of them returned to their families on January 28. Two of them have since left the country after an active media campaign framing them as blasphemers threatened their lives. The other two, although still in Pakistan, have relocated along with their families, uncertain about their future.

While several quarters suspect military spy agencies of being behind the abductions, the director general of the military's Inter Services Public Relations (ISPR), Major General Asif Ghafoor, in his first press conference, denied the army's involvement. Still, a bold editorial appearing in

Dawn newspaper on January 11 read, “The sanitized language — ‘missing persons’, ‘the disappeared’, etc. — cannot hide an ugly truth: the state of Pakistan continues to be suspected of involvement in the disappearance and illegal detentions of a range of private citizens.”

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Dawn’s editorial predicted that “a dark new chapter in the state’s murky, illegal war against civil society appears to have been opened.”

After protests against the disappearances erupted, a popular Twitter and Facebook hashtag #WhoAreTheyDefending accused the protesters of supporting blasphemers, with many tweets calling for their deaths. TV anchor and televangelist Aamir Liaquat Hussain launched an attack against leading journalists like Owais Tohid, media outlets like Jang and Dawn group, as well as several members of the civil society, accusing them of committing treason and blasphemy. In doing so, Hussain – who hosts a controversial talk show in a recently-launched TV channel – repeatedly defied a ban on such accusations laid down by the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA), which called Liaquat’s comments “hate speech.”

Renowned activist and analysts Marvi Sirmed, who herself has come under personal attacks from Aamir Liaquat Hussain, believes there is no way to know if he is parroting someone’s line. “However, looking at who else is taking the position that Aamir Liaquat is taking, it becomes clearer which unseen power wants that line to be propagated,” she says.

In October last year, *Dawn* newspaper staffer Cyril Almeida reported the details of an off-camera meeting where the civilian leadership confronted the then-director general of Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), Lt. General Rizwan Akhtar, about not allowing action against banned outfits in Punjab. Almeida’s story drew a strong backlash from the government, and his name was put on the Exit Control List – only to be removed a few days later after a strong response from the English press and overall media platforms.

Daily *The Nation*, in an editorial following the ban on Cyril Almeida, wrote, “how dare the government and military top brass lecture the press on how to do their job. How dare they treat a feted reporter like a criminal. And how dare they imply that they have either the right or the ability or the monopoly to declare what Pakistan’s ‘national interest’ is.”

While the media attempt to push back, the state-sponsored censorship seems to be expanding from topics like Balochistan to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC); from mainstream to social media. Marvi Sirmed has observed the same phenomenon. “I haven’t received any direct censorship directions from anywhere ever. It’s just that ‘they’ show their displeasure through hundreds of anonymous Twitter accounts,” she says.

Sirmed, who writes a weekly column for *Pakistan Today*, recounts how her voice was censored: “Recently, my regular column in *The Nation* has been stopped abruptly in the wake of pressure from some known unknowns.”

The Nation became a target of social media abuse under the hashtag #ShameOnTheNation after publishing some op-eds criticizing the state's policies. After a barrage of abuse and threats online, the publication was forced to remove some of the op-eds from its website.

After *The News* recently broke the news that 90 acres of land had been allotted to the former chief of army staff, General Raheel Sharif, an organized campaign, both online and offline, called Jang Group treasonous and a blasphemer. Overnight, banners calling for the death of Najam Sethi – a senior journalist and analyst associated with Jang Group – appeared in front of the Karachi Press Club.

Shad Khan, a U.K.-based Pakistani journalist, was recently removed from the country while he was filming for a documentary on the effects of investment brought by CPEC on the people of Gwadar.

“I was granted permission by the Gwadar Port Authority to shoot around the area,” Khan says.

Known for *The Secret Drone War*, which won him an Amnesty Award, Khan was provided with a security official in Gwadar. “I filmed with Pakistan Navy for a day after they verified all of the documentation provided by me,” he says. “However, on the fifth day of shooting, I started receiving visits from officials in civilian clothes who asked for my identity card and I was interrogated by an army major.”

Khan was asked to leave Gwadar without his equipment and the intelligence officials accompanying escorted him to a plane for the U.K.

Khan explains the apparent reason for his removal. “I had to cover a rally of Sardar Akhtar Mengal, the head of Balochistan National Party, when they came to me and asked me to not cover the rally at all,” Khan recalls. “Upon my refusal to comply with their demand, they requested to cover the rally ‘positively,’ which, as a journalist, is not a good practice.

“I’m a Pakistani citizen but not sure if I was just removed or deported. I’m not sure if I still hold the Pakistani nationality or not. Pakistani High Commission in the U.K. hasn’t returned my queries,” he laments.

A similar incident happened with two New York City-based filmmakers, Rehana Esmail and Sina Zekavat, who have been working on a documentary called *Boats Above My House* for the past 18 months. The film is about a landslide in the northern areas of Pakistan and the chain of environmental, social, political, and economic events that followed. “We focus on a group of people in Attabad village who are not formally recognized as citizens and are attempting to build their lives back after they lost their homes after this landslide,” Zekavat says.

Their film received an on-site stop order on November 3, 2016 from the Pakistani security agencies. “Our line producer and DP (all locals) were forced to undergo a prolonged and unclear investigation process,” Zekavat says, adding, “all of our gear (including rental equipment and personal cell phones) and footage is being held for a ‘forensic investigation’ and we’ve been informed that there are possibilities of serious charges against our fellow crew members.”

One of the people they were filming with was Naz, who is the sister of the Baba Jan – a left-wing activist and politician currently imprisoned for life. “Naz is partially involved in her brother’s release from prison as well the general human rights situation for people of Gilgit-Baltistan,” Sina Zekavat says, adding, “however, the footage that we got up until the stop, mainly consisted of Naz and her family cooking and eating together and doing very ordinary things.

The line of questioning by the investigators focused on filming Baba Jan’s house, which the co-directors insist wasn’t the highlight of the documentary. Human rights activist and lawyer Asma Jahangir has decided to take up their case in the court.

In another sign of a growing crackdown, the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) recently banned *Khabaristan Times*, a satire news website famous for taking on politicians, the military, and religious extremists.

Khabaristan Times editor Kunwar Khuldune Shahid considers the ban a continuation of the state’s crackdown on dissent in online spaces. “Our content was published without any bylines, and the author only revealed their name to their audience if they chose to. Article 23 of the cybercrime law itself outlaws spoof and parody, and hence could be triggered to ban the satirical publication,” he says.

Khuldune adds: “Whether it was to target satire or anonymity, it is evident that secular and liberal voices are being targeted. For many jihadist groups are open to express themselves – many do it anonymously as well.”

Islamabad-based journalist Taha Siddiqui believes the attempts by the state to coerce journalists into toeing their narrative line are increasing. “State has financially squeezed news networks if they tried to challenge the state narrative or openly report on taboo topics like Pakistani military affairs independently, since manages stories on such topics.”

Siddiqui predicts tougher days for dissenting voices in Pakistan. “The worst part is that journalists and activists have no idea what the red line is anymore and the state has started to react even more violently when it wants to clamp down on those who are vocal about critically evaluating sociopolitical issues in Pakistan,” he asserts.

Kunwar Khuldune Shahid, who is a keen observer of current affairs himself, agrees.

“This targeting of secular pages and websites could be a way to appease the Islamist sections at a time when a crackdown against jihadist groups and leaders has become inevitable owing to international pressure.”

“Hafiz Saeed being under house arrest, and members of LeT and JuD being put under the ECL [exit control list], highlights this. Maybe the state’s action against liberal voices, and the fact that it preceded the crackdown, was designed to forestall the Islamist backlash,” he concludes.