

## Media Freedom in a Populist Regime: Evidence From Pakistan

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In this study, the researchers analyzed the state of media freedom in Pakistan during the populist regime of Imran Khan from August 2018 till April 2022. For this purpose, semistructured interviews were conducted with senior journalists of prominent newspapers and TV channels in the country. The researchers found that journalists were under immense pressure to perform their duties professionally. They faced intimidations, threats to their families, and termination from services. Furthermore, the government adopted a carrot-and-stick policy while dealing with the media. The supportive media received both financial and professional benefits while the critical media were tightly monitored and punished. Journalists also faced online harassment by the troll factories affiliated with the government. The study showed the Pakistani populist regime was mainly applying the same strategies to control media as were other populist-led governments. However, because of weak institutional support for journalists, the regime was successful in curtailing free expression substantially compared with the situation in rest of the democratic world.

*Keywords: populism, media control, Pakistan, censorship, threats to life, trolls, bipartite approach*

A growing number of studies are available on populist leaders' treatment of news media organizations (Hallin, 2019; Mulla, 2017; Panievsky, 2021; Pons & Hallin, 2021; Tapsell, 2021, to mention just few). These scholars believe populists consider news media as part of the oppositional elitist agendas and hence have to bear their wrath. Hallin (2019) argues that populism ideologically is antielite and believes in the binary of oligarchy and people. The populists believe the political elites are the main beneficiaries of fake news produced by the media (Hallin, 2019; Holt, 2018; Moffitt, 2016). This is why in non-Western

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democracies like India, Turkey, Indonesia, and the Philippines, populist leaders have been able to restrict media freedom through various means (Chakarvartty & Roy, 2015; Özçetin, 2019; Tapsell, 2021). In the case of Pakistan, although the populist regime of Imran Khan had been in power from August 2018 to April 2022, its treatment of media has not been adequately analyzed. Though a number of rights organizations reported the deteriorating state of media freedom in Pakistan, no academic studies are available to examine the strategies implemented by the populist regime to restrict media freedom. In this regard, this study is one of the first attempts to analyze the journalistic perspective on the issue. This article first provides an overview of the news media industry in Pakistan for a better perspective on the topic to be followed by a review of relevant literature and study findings.

### **Media Industry in Pakistan: An Overview**

Pakistan emerged as a free state when British India was divided into two parts in 1947. In those times, a number of English, Urdu, and Bengali newspapers were published. These newspapers mainly focused on the political events happening in the country (Iqbal, 2011; Mujahid, 1991). Unfortunately, the nascent democracy was soon tinkered with by military dictators, and that significantly affected the growth of media (Mezzera & Sial, 2010). In 1958, the military dictator General Ayub Khan staged a coup and dislodged the democratic government. He immediately canceled the existing press laws. Later, he formed the National Press Trust to regulate the news media (Iqbal, 2011; Ricchiardi, 2012). Though democracy returned to Pakistan in the initial years of the 1970s, the popularly elected prime minister, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, continued the authoritarian policies to a greater extent (Iqbal, 2011; Ricchiardi, 2012). The situation turned worse for Pakistani media when Mr. Bhutto's government was dislodged by General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq in 1978. He was ruthless in dealing with media and imprisoned many critical journalists and media owners (Mezzera & Sial, 2010; Mujahid, 1991). With the death of General Zia-ul-Haq in an air crash in 1988, the country saw the return of democracy once again. During the next 11 years, until 1999, when another military dictator, General Pervez Musharraf, dislodged the democratic setup, the democratic rulers allowed media freedom with some variations (Iqbal, 2011). Initially, General Musharraf disallowed free media, but from 2002 onward, he was responsible for a new liberal media policy that led to a boom in Pakistani electronic media. As Mezzera and Sial (2010) have documented, his media policy was based on an assumption that it could be used to strengthen national security and promote him as a liberal leader.

Until 2018, the media industry in Pakistan grew at an unprecedented pace and was considered the most dynamic in South Asia (Rehmat, 2019). There were thousands of newspapers, about 100 television channels, and 209 radio stations—all vying for public attention (Media Ownership Monitor Pakistan report, 2018). Compared with the government media, the private media were more popular. More than 20,000 journalists and 250,000 professionals were associated with Pakistan's private media industry, while the consumer base witnessed unprecedented growth and annual media advertising spending exceeded \$660 million (Media Ownership Monitor Pakistan report, 2018).

After assuming power in 2018, according to Reporters Sans Frontières ([RSF], 2021), Prime Minister Imran Khan seriously restricted the growth of the media industry. Through death threats, administrative coercions, and economic strangulations, critical media houses were silenced and forced to

lay off independent journalists (RSF, 2021). Including Imran Khan in the list of predators of press freedom, the RSF (2021) report said that during his rule, religious conservatism and the ideology of populism increased. The report described Khan's tenure as reminiscent of dictatorial regimes of the past, as freedom of the press had been suppressed in every possible way. RSF (2021) reported that four journalists were killed in 2020 and not a single killer was presented in the court of law (RSF, 2021). Interestingly, the federal capital of Islamabad is the most dangerous city for journalists in Pakistan. Moreover, according to the estimates of the Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists (*Dawn*, 2020), 3,105 media workers, mostly journalists, lost their jobs in just one year.

With the help of a powerful military that is often criticized for being the de facto government, the Khan administration imposed brazen informal censorship in the country (*Dawn*, 2020). According to a Reporters Sans Frontieres' report (*The News*, 2021), the state's economic strangulation of critical media houses and violence against journalists and bloggers were common. During the Khan administration, electronic and social media regulators became subservient to government policies (*The News*, 2021), and coercive and regressive regulations shrank space for dissent and freedom of expression (Foreign Policy, 2021). Pakistan slipped three places down to number 145 in the 2021 World Press Freedom Index, which ranked 180 countries (RSF, 2021). In another chilling report, the Human Rights Watch World Report (2021) said journalists in Pakistan lived in a climate of fear. The report added that journalists faced enforced disappearances, death threats, imprisonments on sedition charges, and online harassment. To avoid these dangers, journalists had to self-censor themselves (Voice of America [VOA], 2021).

The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting is responsible for regulating the media industry in Pakistan. It has established separate bodies to regulate print, electronic, and social media. The constitution of Pakistan guarantees freedom of expression and the existing media laws in Pakistan allow for freedom of expression (Rehmat, 2019). Except for the Imran Khan government, democratic governments in the past three decades respected these laws by and large (Iqbal, 2011). Pakistan was better placed than India in terms of media freedom in 2017 (Abbasi, 2021). The Khan government tried to introduce more stringent media laws in Pakistan in 2020 but had to revert its decision due to countrywide protests by journalist organizations and pressure from the international community (*Dawn*, 2021).

In terms of ownership, media in Pakistan are highly concentrated, and only a few media houses enjoy a monopoly in the sector (RSF, 2021). Apart from the state-owned Pakistan Television Corporation and Radio Pakistan, the three largest media groups are the Jang Group, Herald Group, and Nawa-i-Waqt Group, which enjoy cross-ownership. These three groups were founded by professional journalists before the formation of Pakistan and have inspired journalism traditions to a great extent. Since 2002, with the plethora of TV channels and newspapers, more commercial-oriented media houses have emerged. Ideologically, media groups can be put alongside a continuum from conservative to liberal, with most media falling in between (Rasul & McDowell, 2012). While the Urdu media produce more popular content, the English press is elitist in its approach (Rasul & McDowell, 2012). During the Khan regime, the above-mentioned three legacy media groups were at loggerheads with the government over media freedom while the remaining media houses mostly succumbed to pressure.

### **Theoretical Framework and Literature Review**

Despite the abundance of scholarship on populism, there is no consensus on its definition; it has been variously conceptualized as a type of political ideology, a set of economic policies, a style of discourse, or a political strategy (Moffitt, 2016). An important contribution in this regard is the theorization of media freedom in a populist regime by Kenney (2018). In this study, we borrow his approach, what he calls an organizational approach to populism (Kenny, 2018). He argues that the way in which populist regimes are organized means that they have especially strong incentives to erode press freedom and freedom of expression more broadly (Kenney, 2018). Kenney (2018) defines populism as “the charismatic mobilization of a mass movement in pursuit of political power” (p. 1). He maintains that there are two reasons that populism in this sense matters for press freedom.

First, populist leaders rely heavily on the mass media to deliver their messages and mobilize voters directly. In the absence of extensive organizational outreach to voters, the media thus remain important tools for populists to get public support for their causes. However, once they assume office, controlling the media becomes a core objective as compared with nonpopulist leaders.

Second, populists are highly individualistic. They are not interested in ensuring the survival of their party beyond their own individual political careers. As a result, they are less concerned with maintaining the independence of institutions such as the press, which acts as a check on government power. After gaining power, a populist is more interested in repressing any dissent to maintain power as long as possible. In such a situation, independent media are viewed as threats, and the populists use both official and informal measures to repress them.

In a nutshell, conceiving populism as an organization-mobilization strategy leads to distinctive predictions about the behavior of populists with respect to press freedom. More precisely, populist regimes may be identified by their contrasting approaches to organizational resources and electoral imperatives, which reveal how they would regard media freedom once in power (Kenney, 2018).

Many researchers have examined the state of media freedom in populist regimes, and there is agreement that the media’s watchdog functions have been eroded to some extent. For example, in his seminal study, Kenney (2018) analyzed press freedom in 91 countries from 1980 to 2014. His analysis found that populist rule was associated with a decline in most measures of media freedom when compared with nonpopulist governments. Researchers have identified the various strategies to suppress media in popular regimes, including harassing and prosecuting critical journalists, denial of official advertisements (Tsui, 2015), patronizing sympathetic private media, and coordinating attacks through social media trolls to humiliate the critics (Haller & Holt, 2019; Krämer, 2018; Panievsky, 2021). The following section provides a detailed account of each of these strategies.

### **Attacks on Media Freedom**

Populist leaders complain that professional media organizations distort or conceal information because a majority of the journalists are biased or on the payrolls of certain political elites with no fit to their politically correct agendas (Haller & Holt, 2019). For instance, former U.S. President Donald Trump repeatedly attacked the news media by dubbing journalists as the major purveyors of fake news (Grynbaum, 2017) and among the most dishonest human beings on earth who have enmity with the people (Remnick, 2018). One of his media strategists warned the media to keep their mouths shut (Grynbaum, 2017), leading observers to believe that Trump was running a war against the media. Similarly, a German right-wing populist leader blamed the media for lying. Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro declared investigative reporting as “fake news” dug up by corrupt establishment (Boadle & Slattery, 2018). In Turkey, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan shut down more than 150 news outlets, including 45 newspapers, 29 publishing houses, 23 radio stations, 16 TV stations, 15 magazines, and three news agencies (Mortimer, 2017); tens or even hundreds of journalists remain in prison. In Israel, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu publicly scrutinizes critical journalists, which Panievsky (2021) believes works like soft censorship to manipulate journalists’ professional norms.

Kenny (2020) argues that media freedom is the easy victim of populist rule because of weak institutions in many countries. Intolerance to dissent and the desire to subdue the opposition groups lead populists to disregard media freedom. In a detailed analysis, Kellam and Stein (2016) discussed the declining trends of media freedom in the context of the rise of populist regimes in Latin America. In these countries, populist leaders see most of the established media as their potential enemies in their bid to promote their own narratives. The mainstream journalists remain easy targets to be victimized by the populists (Haller & Holt, 2019). Populists usually frame legacy journalists as puppets of the political establishment (Greven, 2016). In populist discourses, journalists are also blamed for being “partisan, deceitful, biased” (Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019) and for using “double standards when judging established elites compared to representatives of populist movements and parties” (Krämer, 2018, pp. 444–465). In India, Ganguly (2019) analyzed the populist tactics of Premier Narendra Modi and found the regime had resorted to right-wing ideology to silence liberal voices. Critical media are especially considered as animus, and various measures taken to curb freedom have the potential to imperil democracy in the country (Ganguly, 2019). In Pakistan, though, no academic study is available on the state of media freedom in the populist regime of Imran Khan, a number of reports have discussed the declining media freedom in the country, so we ask:

*RQ1: How did journalists see the state of media freedom in the populist regime of Imran Khan in Pakistan?*

### **Not all Media are Bad: Populists’ Bipartite Attitude Toward Media**

Populist leaders do not treat all media outlets as their adversaries. They adopt a bipartite approach toward media where supportive media are labeled as friends of the people and critical media as enemies of the people. For instance, former U.S. President Donald Trump attacked *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, and CNN, while he supported Fox News, owned by the media mogul Rupert Murdoch. In 2017, Murdoch had proudly introduced Donald Trump as his best friend (Borchers, 2017). He also supported

Trump's election campaign, and his mainstream media organization was a major purveyor of Trump's populist messages, lending a strong helping hand to promote his narrative (Borchers, 2017).

In Latin America, populists' treatment of the alliance between the political elite and media owners acquired a new kind of animosity (Alvares & Dahlgren, 2016). As recorded by Waisbord (2013), Latin American populist leaders have successfully brought the issue of media ownership into the public sphere, which is being extensively discussed as a cause of many problems. Populists have received big support from certain civic groups because of their strict stance regarding media ownership and for restricting the operations and power of media organizations. On the other hand, Latin American populists have amicable relations with selected media elites who have been their supporters during election times and toed their populist lines. At the same time in Latin America, populist leaders adjudicated the expropriation of private media organizations that have been opposing their manifestos and policies (Alvares & Dahlgren, 2016; Waisbord, 2013).

Similarly in Asia and Africa, populist leaders are engaged in love-hate relations with news media companies. In Turkey, for example, progovernment companies and conglomerates purchased many powerful private media organizations and established a progovernment media bloc (Özçetin, 2019). In India, populist Prime Minister Narendra Modi has most often been discussed as the one who literally belongs to the television era (Jaffrelot, 2015). In 2014, Modi as prime minister used IndiaTV for his first-ever televised interview, as he is a longtime personal friend of Rajat Sharma, co-owner of the television channel. Modi's friendship with Arnab Goswami, a media mogul, remained a hot debate in media during elections in India (Chakravartty & Roy, 2015). His multiple appearances on Goswami's show led to allegations that he shared national secrets with the latter. Rahul Gandhi, India's congress party leader, made an accusation against Modi for sharing secret information regarding the Balakot air strike with Goswami even before the strike had happened (Gandhi, 2021). Indonesian President Joko Widodo has very close relations with Suryah Paloh, a media mogul, while he issues threats to other media organizations in the country. He is a populist leader who has been able to control media through both friendship and coercion (Aspinall & Mietzner, 2019). In Kenya, Prime Minister Uhuru Kenyatta is the richest man of the country, who owns many media organizations and maintains reciprocal relations with the other media organizations in the country (McCargo, 2012). It is a unique and different example of media control; a media mogul who enjoys political power nationwide (Mellor et al., 2011; Simiyu, 2014). In Pakistan, the old professional media houses like Jang Group and Herald Group are on the hit list of government compared with the recently established commercial media, so we ask:

*RQ2: How did the journalists see the regimes' dualistic attitude toward media (supporting favorable media and criticizing unfavorable media) in Pakistan??*

### **Trolling Critical Journalists**

The emergence of social media and digital technologies has greatly facilitated the decrease of populist leaders' dependence on the traditional media (Bhat & Chadha, 2020). Scholars believe the populist leaders have upped the ante against the legacy media because they are skillfully utilizing the multiple avenues afforded by the new media platforms to engage with their supporters (Hallin, 2019; Hameleers,

2018). Apart from extensively using social media to promote their agendas, populist leaders are supported by well-organized social media teams that launch campaigns against their opponents, including political leaders and journalists, on a frequent basis (Relly, 2021; Waisbord, 2020). Relly (2021) argues that online harassment of journalists has increased worldwide. Journalists' e-mails and social media accounts are bombarded with defamatory, threatening, demeaning, or even pornographic material. Social media teams linked with populist leaders especially target critical reporters through trolling and automation activities to pressure independent journalists against critical coverage and engage them in trivial matters (Ernst et al., 2019; Hendrix, 2019; Panievsky, 2021; Waisbord, 2020). In a detailed analysis focusing on the United States, Waisbord (2020) found that trolling was pervasive and mainly targeted journalists critical of the Trump administration. Bulut and Yörük (2021) argued that in Turkey, political trolls were targeting independent journalists and other critical voices. Likewise, in the Philippines, Estella (2021) and Ong and Cabañes (2019) found that villainous troll factories had mushroomed in the populist regime where journalists and dissenting voices were the main targets. In India, Sinha (2017) analyzed the skillful use of social media by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Through automation and trolling factories, critical journalists and opposition leaders were stalked online and subjected to humiliation. In Pakistan, there are 46 million social media users. More than 88% use Facebook, and 8% use Twitter (Statcounter, 2021). These two platforms are increasingly used by political parties for promoting their agendas. The Imran Khan government was aided by its huge social media team, which frequently trolled politicians, journalists, media owners, and other dissenting voices (BBC, 2019). Therefore, the final question that emerges is:

*RQ3: How did journalists see the regime's use of social media platforms to target the independent and critical media in Pakistan?*

### **Research Method**

Semistructured interviews were conducted with 25 journalists working in senior positions (e.g., chief reporter and news director) in the prominent Pakistani TV news channels and print media. For this purpose, 10 senior journalists (news directors) were selected from the 10 leading TV channels including Geo TV, Dawn TV, ARY TV, Samaa TV, Dunya TV, Express TV, Aaj TV, Neo TV, 24 TV, and 92 TV. Similarly, from the English-language newspapers, five journalists (chief reporters) of *Dawn*, *The News*, *The Express*, *The Nation*, and *Daily Times* were interviewed. From the Urdu press, a total of 10 chief reporters of *Daily Jang*, *Daily Express*, *Daily Dunya*, *Daily 92*, *Daily Nawa-i-Waqt*, *Daily Ausaf*, *Daily Khabrain*, *Daily Aaj*, *Daily Pakistan*, and *Daily Mashraq* were interviewed.

Additionally, the perspectives of six senior journalists who had been laid off by media owners under pressure from the government were also included in the study. These journalists were running separate YouTube channels and were very popular among the audiences for their independent stances on national issues. These included Najam Sethi, Syed Talat Hussain, Murtaza Solangi, Bilal Farouqi, Asad Ali Toor, Mattiullah Jan, and Hamid Mir.

The three authors conducted all these interviews at the interviewees' offices or homes. The questions to the respondents were e-mailed in advance. The questions mainly covered the three research

questions. The interviews lasted for about 35 minutes on average. Most of the interviews were conducted in English. Eleven interviews were conducted in Urdu and later transcribed into English.

All the interviewees agreed to share the names of their news organizations and designations in this study. The interviews were conducted from February to May 2021. The final transcripts were printed, and the core arguments for each of the three research questions and supplementary questions were identified through consensus.

*RQ1: How did journalists see the state of media freedom in the populist regime of Prime Minister Imran Khan in Pakistan?*

Most of the journalists agreed that the Imran Khan government had severely restricted freedom of media in the country. The journalists pointed out that the free flow of information was restricted mainly through two strategies: First, through physical attacks, disappearances, intimidation, and sedition charges against journalists; and second, through the economic strangulation of the media houses by denying them their due in advertising.

Regarding the first strategy, the journalists shared their personal experiences and referred to the reports of various international organizations working for media freedom to highlight the threats that media people faced in Pakistan. They opined that the government had zero tolerance for criticism and dissent and that it was evident from the incarcerations of opposition political leaders, human rights activists, and journalists. Some of the most senior journalists, who had been in the business for four decades or more, said they had never seen such draconian steps against the media even when military dictators were ruling the country.

Kamran Yusuf, chief reporter of the English daily *Express Tribune*, said, "Pakistan is one of the deadliest countries for journalists in the world. There are red lines and no-go areas, and if a journalist crosses these, the powerful institutions won't hesitate to eliminate him." He added that the military was involved in running the political and economic affairs, but since highlighting the military's role in these issues was prohibited, journalistic freedom was substantially reduced in the country. Absar Alam, a senior journalist, was expelled from his position due to his critical stance and later was shot by an unidentified man near his home. Luckily, he survived the attack. While sharing his perspective on the state of media freedom under the Imran Khan regime, Alam said, "The country is sliding toward authoritarianism. Journalists are killed with total impunity. This is unprecedented in the history of Pakistan." A senior reporter working for *Dawn* said journalists were extra careful while reporting on sensitive issues. Citing his own example, he said he usually excluded criticism of the military or mentions of its involvement in politics while reporting on proceedings from parliament or press conferences of opposition leaders.

Journalists were also concerned about the disappearances of their colleagues. In Pakistan, when government agencies abduct a journalist, it is facetiously said that the abductee has been to the hilly northern areas for a visit. Once freed, the abducted journalists usually avoid commenting on what happened to them to avoid further problems. A journalist working for Samaa TV said, "Besides personal fears, my parents always advise me not to offend the security institutions. They are concerned about my safety and



want me to switch to some other profession." Another journalist admitted he often censored himself to avoid trouble. "Freedom is in short supply in this country. This is what we have realized, and most of journalists are aware of it," he said. Senior journalist Murtaza Solangi, who was fired from hosting a TV show under government pressure, aptly summarized the silencing of journalists in these words:

The regime is following a well-charted policy to control free media. First, a critical journalist is warned and threatened. If he continues professional duty, then he is banished from office by influencing the media owners. If the journalist is still not dissuaded from critical opinion, he is abducted and beaten. Lastly, he can be killed if the institutions believe killing him would send a fearing message to all the independent journalists.

The fears and intimidations mentioned by these journalists are also reported by a number of organizations working on freedom of media. The United Nations Education, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) reported that 18 journalists had been killed in Pakistan since 2018 (UNESCO, 2021). Likewise, thousands of media workers have been affected by the high-handed policies of the Imran Khan regime (*Dawn*, 2020).

Regarding the second strategy of economic strangulation of news media, the interviewed journalists said the media industry faced acute financial challenges during the Imran Khan government. They agreed the regime denied official advertisements to private media organizations, took TV channels off air, and cut off the distribution of newspapers which made it very hard for the independent media to survive in the market. Chief reporters from *Jang* and *Nawa-i-Waqt* gave similar answers when asked how the PTI government restricted media through its economic policies. They said that media in Pakistan were highly reliant on government advertisements that allowed the later to blackmail media to refrain from critical coverage if they had to receive advertisements. They agreed that the Imran Khan government was able to tame most of the media houses this way because revenues were hard to come by from other sources.

Though some of the more influential media houses did manage without assistance from the government because they were getting advertisement revenue from the private sector, the government was resorting to arbitrary powers to control these houses as well. For example, a senior journalist at *Dawn TV* said:

If we do critical coverage of government, the frequencies of transmission are changed or the cable operators are pressurized to put off airing our shows. No advertiser would like it, and it becomes very difficult to get sponsorships if the disruptions continue frequently.

Likewise, for print media, Latif Zaman of the *Times* said, "If you report on sensitive issues, the authorities won't let you distribute your newspaper. If a newspaper is closed for several days, the advertisers would disappear."

During the prime ministership of Imran Khan, a number of TV channels, including *Geo TV*, *Channel 24*, and *AbbTakk*, were shut down on several occasions and newspapers disallowed to print editions (International Federation of Journalists [IFJ], 2020). These incidents forced journalists and media owners to exercise restraint while reporting on the populist government.

Though most of the journalists agreed that media in Pakistan were muzzled through the abovementioned techniques, two senior journalists working for progovernment TV channels (ARY TV and 92 TV) had a different perspective. They believed the government should have been given the chance to complete its tenure of five years and only then its performance critically evaluated. They also criticized fellow journalists for being critical of the government and advised patience and cooperation with the government.

To sum up, the interviewed journalists were critical of the populist regime's treatment of the media. They expressed apprehensions about the killings, harassment, abductions, and imprisonments of journalists, and feared the government had lost its democratic color and degenerating into authoritarianism. They opined that free media were essential for keeping the federation intact, and called for treating dissent and opposition with respect. Most of the journalists argued that the ruling party had benefited a lot from the independent media in the past, and they expected their government to be more media friendly. The journalists were optimistic that they would prevail in the long run because media have been through such times in the past as well.

*RQ2: How did the journalists see the regime's dualistic attitude toward media (supporting favorable media and criticizing unfavorable media) in Pakistan?*

Most of the journalists agreed that the government was maintaining double standards and a bipartite approach while dealing with the media. While the critical media were targeted, the supportive media houses were receiving professional and financial benefits. Some of the critical journalists who were working in the progovernment media houses were repeatedly dissuaded from writing critical commentaries on social media. Most of them had been silenced, and those who insisted on maintaining their professional independence had been terminated.

Senior journalist Hamid Mir, host of one of the most influential talk shows on Geo TV, had to discontinue his program because of pressure from the government. He told us, "The government has been able to subdue most of critical media outlets. Only a few media houses are remaining that try to maintain some professionalism." He feared these media houses were facing huge financial problems and their owners and journalists were subjected to coercion, and sooner than later they would acquiesce to the government's demands. For example, the country's largest TV channel, Geo TV, which was critical of the government, had to tone down after its advertising rates were slashed by the government and the owner of the channel was jailed on fabricated charges (*The Nation*, 2019).

The journalists said the government functionaries were openly declaring the critical media as their adversaries. They referred to Prime Minister Imran Khan, who had on several occasions called on his voters to boycott the independent media outlets. A senior reporter of *Daily Times* said, "The prime minister and his cabinet ministers usually accuse the journalists of independent media for having taken bribes from the opposition parties." Giving a personal example, he said that a member of the ruling party had recently labeled him as an agent of India because of his critical reporting. Mattiullah Jan, who barely survived a kidnapping attempt in Islamabad, said, "The members of the ruling party do not mince words while dealing

with journalists of independent media. They would declare you a traitor or use abusive language if you put critical questions to them.”

A majority of the journalists agreed that through indictments of several independent media outlets like Herald Group and Jang Group, the government had successfully sent a tough message to the rest of the media organizations to bow to its demands. A journalist from 24 News Channel said:

When a journalist working in Jang Group is implicated in some case, it sends a clear message to rest of the media houses to be careful. I think this has worked well for the government in its bid to control the media.

The journalists were concerned that most of the media owners were pressured to tell their employees to produce supportive coverage of the government. In this way, they argued, media independence was waning in the country.

While explaining the reason behind this particular treatment of media by the government, senior journalist Bilal Ghauri said the prime minister and most of the cabinet ministers were very media savvy and wanted to dominate news coverage with favorable portrayals. “I haven’t seen anyone so sensitive to media coverage as Prime Minister Imran Khan. He wrongly believes it’s only the favorable media coverage that can give him stability.” When asked about the dualistic approach toward media, a journalist from Samaa TV said:

The politicians of the ruling party dislike dissent. They do not like a dialogue and have zero tolerance for opposition. If you question them, they will hurl a personal attack on you through accusations like being bribed by the opposition parties or working as agent for an enemy country.

On the other hand, the progovernment media were enjoying maximum benefits. They had easy access to the top government offices like the prime minister’s house, the president’s house, the Ministers’ Enclave, and the most influential address: army house. The top officials were regularly appearing for exclusive interviews and news in these media outlets while the oppositional media were denied these facilities. A journalist of progovernment 92 TV channel said:

We do not face any issue in inviting the government officials as the producers in our competitive critical TV channels who usually complain of their inaccessibility. When the prime minister gives us exclusive interviews and there he reveals a policy statement, our channel gets good ratings.

Besides accessibility to exclusive information, the progovernment media outlets were getting advertisements and funds from government bodies. In Pakistan, there is no mechanism for equitable distribution of government advertisement. It is at the discretion of the government to benefit an organization as much as he likes. A journalist working for Express TV said, “The progovernment media are getting richer at the cost of critical media. This is why more and more media are now supporting the government to get

more advertisements.” Journalists of the progovernment media said their owners have personal friendships with the top policy makers in the government. They revealed that the media owners were taking advice from the ministers on how to cover events and, in return, were getting advertisements and other incentives. For example, the progovernment ARY News was paid higher advertisement rates than the critical Geo TV, though the latter is more widely viewed (*The Nation*, 2019). Likewise, other progovernment media houses like Dunya TV were given more advertisements than the Dawn group because of its independent stance.

A journalist working for *Dunya* newspaper said:

When we report on some anti-government statement by the opposition political parties, we try to tone it down and place it in less prominent place. And then to balance it, we take a response from the government and prominently displays it without too much editing.

To sum up, the journalists said the government followed a dual policy while dealing with the media. While the supportive media were facilitated through financial and professional assistance, the critical media were targeted. The owners and journalists of critical media faced problems for their objective stance. This treatment succeeded in dissuading the rest of the media from critical reporting of government activities; hence, overall the media environment was kept under control.

*RQ3: How did the journalists see the regime’s use of social media platforms to target the independent and critical media in Pakistan?*

Apart from physical attacks on journalists and the regimes’ various techniques to censor the media, journalists were also concerned about the government-linked social media teams on Facebook and Twitter and the paid YouTubers who were running campaigns against independent media houses and journalists. They believed the regime was responsible for the large-scale online material against journalists. A majority of them had experienced online trolling at some level. A journalist working for Nawa-i-Waqt said:

Of all the social media trolls, the government paid YouTubers were the worst. They were presenting fabricated information against all those who disagreed with the government policies. They have spared no one, the politicians and journalists are the most frequently targeted.

The journalists revealed that, alongside the dozens of progovernment YouTubers, many independent and neutral people who were running YouTube channels were now following the former to get more views and subscribers. They said that YouTube channels were a huge financial success. The ruling Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) and the military information wing had hundreds of trolls running fake accounts and using algorithms to enhance the number of views:

To get the attention of pro-government trolls and millions of PTI supporters, independent YouTubers are now attacking the critical voices. This way, they are getting more viewers and more money.

Journalists also complained about the organized campaigns against them on Facebook and Twitter. They criticized the ruling party and the military for the rising trolling activities. Senior journalist Shakeel Sheikh, working for *The News*, said, "Whenever I tweet on some critical issues, I receive dozens of replies within an hour. They use abusive and obscene language." Independent journalist Asad Ali Tour said:

The critical journalists are specially monitored on social media. Whenever I post some content, a barrage of incivility and hateful messages start. Initially, I thought of leaving the social media, but now I am used it and do not read their responses.

The journalists said the progovernment trolls were mainly resorting to attacking the personal lives of journalists and their family members. They mentioned that special hashtags and trends were run for several days to shame the critical journalists. Hamid Mir, probably the most trolled journalist because of his prodemocracy stance, said:

The trolls would spare nothing to attack you. They would hurl all sorts of profanities and expletives on you and your family members. They get a field day if they find a photograph of your wife, daughter, sister, and even mother. If they fail to get a photo, they would make caricatures of you, and these go viral in no time.

Compared with their male counterparts, female journalists were the easier targets. A number of progovernment trolls ran a number of trends against female journalists where they were harassed and intimidated online, forcing a number of female reporters to quit the profession. Senior female journalist Asma Shirazi said:

Pakistan is a conservative society. Female journalists come to this profession in the face of immense family pressure. The government trolls are specially targeting female journalists through photoshopped pictures, uncivil comments on their stories, and sending profane messages to their family members.

She and other journalists said most of the female journalists had restricted their presence on social media because of trolls.

Besides highlighting the uncivil and profane comments directed at them, some journalists shared concerns about receiving threatening message from these trolls. A journalist said:

The most threatening part of trolling is when they share all your personal information like the names of your family members, your home address, office timings, and where you have been last night. When I first received these, I was really frightened. The end result is I have restricted my online activities.

Another journalist said, "The trends on social Twitter will accuse you of receiving funds from foreign countries to defame Islam and Pakistan. The common people are very sensitive on these issues, and any unwanted event can happen to you."

To sum up, the government was actively trolling critical journalists on social media to keep them under pressure. While a majority of the male journalists remained undeterred by the online trolling, female journalists had become careful regarding what they reported and even restricted their online activities. The female journalists were concerned about the character-assassination campaigns on social media and said they were facing pressure from their family members to eschew confrontations with the government, though they themselves wanted to continue performing their duties with professionalism.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

The findings of this study support the global trends in the populists' treatment of free media. Because of the peculiar organizational and electoral requirements of populist leaders, they are distinct in their treatment of media. The core argument in the organization-mobilization strategy of populism maintains that while populists generally stress the importance of free media, once in power, they place restrictions on it. Imran Khan was the major beneficiary of free media in Pakistan and was able to attract media attention for his maverick behavior. However, after coming to power, he has disallowed free functional media and applied various strategies like threatening journalists physically, terminating their job contracts, economically strangulating media houses, and trolling critical journalists.

Pakistan is included on the list of deadliest countries for journalists, and in this study, we learned from journalists that they faced threats of abductions, warnings from unidentified people, threats to their families, and termination from jobs. While Pakistan has never been a friendly country for journalists (Human Rights Watch, 2009), the antimedia measures by the PTI government were unprecedented. Two senior journalists told us that even the military dictators in the past had not arranged such elaborate mechanisms to control media. Studies in several non-Western countries also found that in populist regimes, journalists were facing security problems, including imprisonments and death threats (Kellam & Stein, 2016; Kenny, 2020). Kenny (2020), for example, argued that compared with the West, populists in non-Western parts of the world were able to silence critical media because of weak institutional support for journalists. Similarly, government officials accused journalists of taking bribes from opposition political parties. It had become common, during press briefings and other encounters with journalists, for politicians of the ruling party to accuse journalists of sponsoring the agendas of opposition parties. This is an effective strategy to put journalists on the defensive, which Panievsky (2021) believes acts like soft censorship to manipulate professional norms. Populist leaders in the United States, Brazil, India, Israel, and the Philippines have frequently dismissed queries of critical journalists by accusing them of working for the elite political parties (Panievsky, 2021).

An important strategy to curtail media freedom is to add to the economic woes of the industry. In the face of an economic slump, media dependence on government advertisement has increased. During Imran Khan's regime, the government used it as a bargaining chip to deny critical media their share. This has led to massive layoffs and cuts in salaries. According to the Federal Union of Journalists, more than 4,000 journalists have been laid off between 2017 and 2021 (VOA, 2021). Likewise, the elite media that were getting support from the private sector are also under pressure. Through arbitrary means, the private sector is pressurized to stop advertisements to these media outlets, coupled with stoppage of transmissions and publications. These policies have significantly contributed to the silencing of critical voices in Pakistan.

Much in line with the Kenny's organizational approach, the populist regime in Pakistan did not altogether boycotted the mainstream media; rather, it befriended the supportive media. The prime minister maintained personal friendships with a number of media owners and senior anchors and columnists to ensure his government activities were positively covered. This policy seemed to have worked, and apart from some elite media houses like Jang Group and Herald Group, most of the organizations got closer to the government to receive financial benefits. Most of the government functionaries stopped appearing on critical TV channels and preferred to sit with friendly hosts (Borchers, 2017). This strategy is common among all the populist regimes, which favor friendly media and despise critical media (Chakravartty & Roy, 2015; Özçetin, 2019; Waisbord, 2013).

Last but not least, the Imran Khan government ran a huge social media team with hundreds of employees to highlight its stances and counter critical voices. Most of the journalists claimed they were attacked by online trolls. A number of journalists claimed photoshopped pictures of them and their family members were shared to publicly shame them (Hameleers, 2018). Female journalists were the worst victims of online incivilities. Hashtags and trends were run against these journalists for consecutive days, and YouTubers spread information that incited hate against them. This led to a number of female journalists quitting their jobs to save the honor of their families (VOA, 2020). Studies in India have shown that the populist regime has resorted to social media to harass journalists and intimidate them for critical reporting (Bhat & Chadha, 2020). Waisbord (2020), for example, argued that trolling was pervasive in the United States during the Trump administration to target critical journalists. In Turkey, India, and Israel, researchers found that the populist leaders were successful in producing a culture of censorship through online harassments of journalists and opposition political parties (Panievsky, 2021; Sinha, 2017).

This study is not without limitations. We only interviewed journalists in this study. For a thorough debate on the topic, it is important to analyze the perspective of media owners and those involved in making editorial policies of news organizations. Moreover, we were able to interview just three female journalists because of the particular sample requirements of this study. More female journalists should be included for analysis because they are the most vulnerable in the cultural context of Pakistan. Journalists in this study were mainly of the dominant Punjabi ethnic group. Perspectives of journalists belonging to other minor ethnic groups should also be studied because they remain easy targets for powerful groups in Pakistan. Last but not least, media freedom in Pakistan is threatened by a number of nonstate actors, and their roles too should be analyzed for a comprehensive inquiry into the topic. Despite these and other limitations, in this first-ever study on the state of media freedom in a populist regime in Pakistan, we believe we have addressed the important issues that characterize the media environment in the current times.

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