

# THE RAPIDLY WORSENING STATE OF CIVIL LIBERTIES IN PAKISTAN

DONT  
KILL  
JOURNALIST

JOURNALIST  
IS A  
MESSENGER

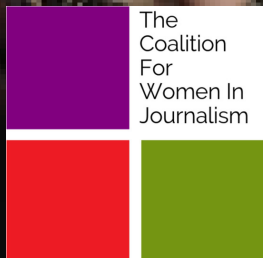


Photo Credit: AAMIR QURESHI / AFP

2021  
REPORT

# ABOUT US

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The Coalition For Women In Journalism (CFWIJ) is a global organization of support for women journalists. The CFWIJ pioneered mentorship for mid-career women journalists across several countries around the world and is the first organization to focus on the status of free press for women journalists. Our network of individuals and organizations brings together the experience and mentorship necessary to help female career journalists navigate the industry. Our goal is to help develop a strong mechanism where women journalists can work safely and thrive.

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## **CFWIJ expresses concern regarding the rapidly worsening state of civil liberties in Pakistan**

The Coalition For Women In Journalism is extremely perturbed by the deteriorating state of civil rights in Pakistan. Military intervention in politics has long been a problem in the country's short history. Members of the civil society who have risen to demand greater participation in the governance of the country, criticized the human rights breaches committed by the military and mobilized vulnerable sections of the population have been routinely harassed, threatened, abducted by the state and even murdered.

The ignorance by the current ruling party Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf, of what the military establishment has been doing to suppress rights of the country, has in fact opened new doors of greater persecution of voices of dissent in the country. While the political landscape, online and offline, has remained hostile for political dissenters, the past few weeks has witnessed an acceleration of extra-judicial attempts at silencing critics.

On April 20, 2021, Absar Alam, a vocal critic of the current regime was shot outside his house by unknown assailants.



The Coalition For Women In Journalism has thoroughly recorded the ongoing violence in the country even as international powers have remained silent and let the injustices unfold. Women journalists in Afghanistan continue to play an immensely important role in a country that has seen extreme political instability in recent years, despite a direct threat to their life. In times like these, it becomes the moral duty of international watchdogs and those in power to amplify their voices. The empowerment of Afghan women relies on alliance, not invasion.

**CFWIJ repeatedly spoke out about the killings of Afghan women journalists:**

On May 11 2019, the murder of Mina Mangal sent shockwaves across the region. Mina had been working as the parliamentary adviser to the Afghan government, a job she took after spending a big chunk of her career as a prominent TV presenter for Pashto-language channels. Having sounded several warnings regarding the threats she was receiving, Mangal was gunned down in broad daylight, and the family alleged, her conservative ex-husband who did not approve of her feminist politics was behind the attack. They accused the security agencies of being lax in their duties, after their inability to protect Mangal despite the several complaints of threats she had registered with them.



On May 25, 2021, Asad Ali Toor was physically assaulted by men who broke into his house.

And in what became a widely reported story in the country, On May 29, 2021, popular news show host Hamid Mir was taken off air, after it came to light that the military had apparently pressured Geo news to suspend him. Following this, supporters of the current regime registered a petition in a court in Gujranwala accusing Hamid Mir and Asma Shirazi, another popular journalist who expressed support for Mir, of sedition.

On the morning of June 4, 2021, political activist and leader of the Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement, Manzoor Pashteen was arrested in Kohat when he was on his way to attend a non-violent sit-in. At the same time, this was a clear attempt at intimidation and underplaying the importance of civil activists and politicians representing the will of the people.

As worrying as these developments are, these are only the latest occurrences in a long trend of harassment of civil society members that has taken place under this regime.



On 26 May, 2019, the military opened fire on peaceful demonstrators who had gathered to record their protest against the military excesses near Kharqamar check post in the Datta Khel Subdivision of North Waziristan.

In September 2019, Gulalai Ismail, a human rights activist known for criticizing the military was forced to flee Pakistan due to unrelenting persecution and state harassment.

Soon afterwards in February 2020, the police arrested activists at another peaceful protest organized by the PTM in Islamabad and booked the demonstrators under charges of sedition. The detainees were taken to Adiala jail, a high security prison facility for hardened criminals and reports of torture soon surfaced.

In March 2020, a right wing religious mob attempted to attack the Aurat March parade that took place in Islamabad. Organizers of the march were routinely maligned and trolled online by pro-government twitter accounts.

On July 21, 2020, another journalist Matiullah Jan was abducted in Islamabad a day prior to his scheduled appearance at the Supreme Court to defend himself against charges of "using derogatory/contemptuous language and maligning the institution of judiciary."



The following month, in August 2020, women journalists issued a collective statement condemning the hostility they were being forced to confront in the online political landscape. The journalists alleged that the attacks come from pro-government accounts that are being trained and weaponized by the state itself.

In November 2020, an arrest warrant was issued against activist and scholar Ammar Ali Jan for his political dissent. Jan is renowned activist campaigning for student and labour rights.

On December 17, 2020, National Assembly member and leader of the Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement, Ali Wazir was arrested by the Sindh police on concocted charges. Wazir remains in state custody, with his bail pleas being dismissed.

On December 22, 2020, the body of Karima Baloch was found in Ontario. She was a Baloch rights activist living in exile due to threats by the Pakistani state. Baloch's body was abducted by law enforcement agencies upon return to Pakistan who forced the family to immediately bury it, denying them her burial rites.



This list is by no means exhaustive. It is only a brief insight into the violation of civil liberties taking place in Pakistan under the current government. The country ranks 145th on the Press Freedom Index issued by RSF. And spaces of dissent continue to shrink.

"Journalists and dissidents are being silenced from all corners of the country. Physical attacks, imprisonments, bogus court cases, and bullets. This follows another series of targets and threats to those who speak out about the aforementioned attacks demanding justice. These attacks are met with impunity. If those who speak against the silencing of journalists and human rights defenders are silenced too, it removes the ability for a nation to have human rights. Removing human rights is an erasure of a nation. Can Pakistan call itself a country, if its nation is erased? This is the question we want Pakistani generals to ask themselves," said founder of the CFWIJ, Kiran Nazish, on the situation unfolding.

Asma Shirazi, a journalist currently being targeted by the state, also spoke to CFWIJ. "What we are seeing right now is unprecedented. What we are witnessing is worse than what we had to experience during some of the dictatorships," she said. "What is this if not fascism?"

The involvement of the military in civilian politics has been a problem in the country since its formation. However, this right-wing shift after two successive civilian governments who had tried to tilt the balance of the civ-mil dynamic in the country, appears to be a step back that has many worried. It suddenly feels like civil society is being forced to compromise on the progress it had made over the last decade.





“Pakistan is not so much a country as an overly large cantonment where civilians live on rent. The Pakistani military has routinely provided mercenary services to the higher bidder at the expense of its own citizens and has then demonized the voices of dissent and frustration that have emerged from the brutalized populace,” said one of our sources based in the country who prefers to stay anonymous. “From what happened in the Eastern wing of the country in 1971, to what is happening in Balochistan and in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa now is the same story of a bloated military reenacting colonial violence through the colonial apparatus it inherited in 1947. It is undemocratic, undignified, and inhumane. Dissent and freedom of thought are important processes in the growth of a society. The Pakistan military has repeatedly tried to ensure stagnancy in the political culture of the country to meet its violent, capitalist self-interests.”

The Coalition For Women In Journalism condemns in the most thorough terms the actions of the Pakistan military and the current government. Both institutions exist to serve the people, not to rule them. Their overreach is reprehensible and undemocratic. We extend our support to the journalists and activists in the country and stand in solidarity with the people’s movements struggling for greater civil rights.



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