

## **The government of Pakistan, Judiciary, biased Media, and Vigilantes – Pakistan’s Unholy Alliance against Freedom of Expression**

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The year 2017 started disastrously for Freedom of Expression in Pakistan. But the moderators and social media directly threatened earlier this month when Justice Shaukat Aziz Siddiqui of the Islamabad High Court (IHC) roared a decree against Freedom of Speech to completely shut off social media while shedding tears, swearing in the name of God and overwhelmed by the zealotry religious extremism. He received a prompt endorsement from Interior Minister Chaudhry Nisar who warned: “We can go to the extent of permanently blocking all such social media websites which would refuse to cooperate with us in blocking the blasphemous content.” The Minister also wants people to stop criticizing judiciary and the government. Information minister Mariyum Aurangzeb has also extended the jurisdictions of the cybercrime law and threatened to persecute those criticizing Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif on social media. The Prime Minister and family have been mocked and questioned on social media on many corruption scandals including Panama Papers. In the middle of the storm, the Senate unanimously passed a resolution asking the government an exemplary punishment for the accused under section 295-C, who are blasphemous on social media according to the government interpretation.

In another ruling, The Islamabad High Court has also asked authorities about the departure of the accused blogger making it impossible for people to run for the safety. It happened in October 2016 when a Pakistani journalist Cyril Almeida was immediately put on notorious Exit Control List (ECL) after the publication of his article on Civil-Military relationship.

This inflammatory, emotionally and organized provocation has left Free Speech exposed to be lynched and jailed, restricted press and silencing the voices against corruption and human rights. In the speeches, public debates, Friday prayers and on the social media, killing an accused of blasphemy is preaching to be the way to the heaven.

This judicial and the government alliance has been widely celebrated by the vigilantes who immensely used ‘blasphemy’ to silence free speech or settling in personal disputes. This law does not relieve even mentally or physically challenged people. At least 70 men and women have been killed on mere suspicion of blasphemy between 1987 and now, and an estimated 1,480 people have been accused under the blasphemy laws. Many of them have been tortured to death by the mobs or burnt alive in the kilns. Misinterpretation of this law is equally dangerous for minorities and Muslims.

The police are now empowered to register a case of blasphemy under IT Act 153A, 295 IPC 66 section based on a screen grab of the social media. The government is asking Facebook to block anything blasphemous, satirical and libel according to the government’s perception or reveal the source of the writers and creators of such material. Facebook was banned in Pakistan 2010 for two weeks and for four years between 2012 and 2016.

Since start of this year, three media personnel and four right activists have been killed, five bloggers/activists kidnapped and tortured; three of them released later and fled the country, media crew attacked, female journalists verbally abused in public; one of them by a woman Anusha Rehman, Minister of state for Information Technology. Two local language journalists Ikhtlaque Ahmed Jokhio and Qurban Ali Gadehi are facing defamation charges in jail. In March 2017, the team of 92 News booked for investigating the irregularities in restaurants. In October 2016, female reporter Saima Kanwal of K21 News channel was slapped by a police officer in a Federal building. This was caught online and the officer was never charged or disciplined. In February 2017, the State-Owned Pakistan Television (PTV) female anchor Tanzeela Mazhar resigned after her harassment complaint ignored against a politically well-connected male officer.

Media and journalists have already self-censored to modify Freedom of Speech. Political manipulation, killings, censorships, misogyny, unbelievably high costs to stay in business and religious affiliations has largely bifurcated media in Pakistan. Based on social media activities of the official pages, thirty Press Clubs out of an estimated ninety in the country (as on December 2016), have openly asked for death penalties and harshest punishments for accusers. None of the press clubs have officially denounced this law.

Pakistan Press Foundation – PPF, did not speak out and instead, in an article on International Women's Day, “promote the safety of female staff,” they entirely ignored missing female journalist Zeenat Shahzadi. PPF Facebook page also failed to raise voice. Pakistan Federal union of journalist – PFUJ and Pakistan Journalist Association – PJA have also turned blind eyes from the issue. In a Facebook post on March 11, PJA asked the government punishing the social media activists. PJA runs Facebook page as “Mukhtar Ahmad Naz.”

Now vigilantes, police, state, biased media, and judiciary are up against Freedom of Speech and the world is watching; intermittently with verbal praise and photo ops.

The Senate in Pakistan swiftly adopted a resolution to condemn mosque's attack in Quebec. Regrettably, the High Commission of Canada in Pakistan and Canadian Ministry of Foreign/ global Affairs have been inconsiderate to urge Pakistan to stop silencing the Freedom of Speech. Shamefully, the Canadian members of the parliaments with ties to Pakistan never condemn media attacks in Pakistan.

Why does Canada always need Alan Kurdi to act? Perhaps they are too busy spying and charging Canadian journalists and whistleblowers at home?

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