

Caretaker Prime Minister Nasir-ul-Mulk,
Prime Minister's Office
44000 Constitution Avenue,
Islamabad,
Pakistan

Paris, June 25, 2018

Object : Increasing violence and censorship on media ahead of elections in Pakistan

Caretaker Prime Minister Nasir-ul-Mulk,

Reporters Without Borders (also internationally known as RSF), an international media rights group that defends press freedom, and its partner Freedom Network (FN), a Pakistan-based media watchdog, would like to draw your attention to the growing curtailment of press freedom in the run-up to the general elections due to be held in Pakistan on 25 July.

You, Caretaker Prime Minister Nasir-ul-Mulk, along with Chief Justice Mian Saqib Nisar have publicly stated that you will ensure free and fair elections, for which a free and independent press is essential. However, both RSF and FN have noted an increase in violence against journalists and censorship in recent weeks. This spike in press freedom violations has caused us to fear a surge in attacks against journalists and media as the elections draw closer. What with threats, abductions, beatings, illegal suspensions and disrupted distribution, media and journalists are being harassed by the military and intelligence services, as well by political actors, in a clear attempt to intimidate them and prevent independent reporting ahead of the elections.

- Journalist and human rights activist **Marvi Sirmed**'s house was burgled on 21 June and culprits took away travel documents and electronic devices.
- **Gul Bukhari**, a columnist known for her anti-military stance, was on her way to an interview for *Waqt TV* in Lahore on 5 June when she was abducted and detained for several hours.
- In a separate incident the same day, investigative journalist and *BOL News* anchor **Asad Kharal** was brutally assaulted by masked men in Lahore.
- **Ahmed Noorani**, an investigative journalist who works for *The News International* bureau in Islamabad, tweeted on 13 June that his family was being harassed. Noorani survived a murder attempt in 2017 after writing investigative stories about the military.
- At a press conference on 4 June, Maj. Gen. Asif Ghafoor, the spokesperson for Pakistan's military, accused a number of journalists of sharing "anti-state and anti-military propaganda" online and he even displayed photos of them.

- Distribution of the English-language daily *Dawn*, Pakistan's oldest newspaper, being disrupted in much of the country in mid-May after it published an interview with former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif.
- In April, cable TV operators were unofficially instructed to stop carrying the *Geo TV* network's channels, including *Geo News*, in most of Pakistan because it had dedicated airtime to former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif.

The credibility of the outcome of general elections will be tainted if an enabling environment is not created for journalists to report the elections freely and unhindered. Furthermore, the country's democratic credentials will be questioned by the international community if the media are not able to report independently and without any kind of pressure or manipulation. It is the state's responsibility to protect journalists and medias and to promote a safe and enabling environment for journalists to perform their work independently and without undue interference.

For this reason, RSF and FN advise you to take all necessary steps :


- to respect and ensure the right of the population to freedom of information and to allow a independent coverage of the next general elections campaign.
- to ensure that the security forces refrain from any act of violence against journalists (including abduction and torture).
- to ensure effective protection of the rights of journalists and their physical safety during the elections and protests, and place this issue at the center of the next general election.
- to undertake systematic and thorough investigations of crimes against journalists, followed by the effective prosecution of those responsible before independent courts, in order to reinforce the rule of law and to end impunity for such crimes.
- to allow journalists to safely report on official events.
- to authorise media coverage in Balochistan and Sindh.

We look forward to your reply and we will examine any comments you would like to make on these issues with great interest.

Sincerely,



Christophe Deloire
Secretary-General
Reporters Without Borders



Iqbal Khattak
Executive Director
Freedom Network