

# STATE OF MEDIA AND DIGITAL FREEDOMS REPORT IN PAKISTAN

# 2018



# STATE OF MEDIA AND DIGITAL FREEDOMS REPORT IN PAKISTAN 2018

## **Authors**

Salwa Rana  
Talal Raza  
Waqas Naeem

## **Editor**

Sadaf Khan

## **Design**

Aniqa Haider

Published by Media Matters for Democracy in February 2019  
Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0)  
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/> Some rights reserved.

**MediaMatters**  
*for***Democracy**  
Policy Research & Advocacy Initiative



# FOREWORD

The year 2018 was the election year. Those who live in Pakistan and those who keep an eye on the country's general political environment both know that the year of election is generally rife with increased threats to freedom of expression. The last two general elections (in 2008 and in 2013) marked the highest number of targeted killings of journalists in the whole decade and we saw violence of all sorts against journalists spike during the election year.

Thus, for us at Media Matters for Democracy, 2018 was a year of trepidation. We hoped that we would not see violence against journalists, but knew that with or without physical violence, the curbs on journalistic freedoms would increase. As this publication documents, the press came under both physical and financial attacks in 2018 and different kinds of intimidation tactics against journalists were employed.

This report presents an overview of different factors that come to define the expression and information ecosystem in Pakistan – ranging from violent and regulatory actions against the media, to online censorship, to right to information regime to disinformation, disconnections, data protection and legislative developments related to the cyberspace – the media and digital rights monitor takes you on a quick journey through the year 2018. This brief overview of the election year has been compiled as a quick reference point for journalists and advocates alike.

We hope that the new year brings more positive developments to Pakistan and we do not have to continue documenting a landscape that is generally regressive and sobering.



**Sadaf Khan**

Co Founder, Director

Media Matters for Democracy

February 2019

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 01 **05**

**Press Freedoms -  
Threatened**

Chapter 02 **10**

**Digital Expression  
Restricted**

Chapter 03 **15**

**The sunshine laws  
shine brighter**

Chapter 04 **18**

**Connection Disrupted**

Chapter 05 **22**

**Data Protection -  
Non Existent**

Chapter 06 **26**

**Disinformation -  
A political tool**

Chapter 07 **30**

**Cybercriminals -  
targeting the  
vulnerable**

Chapter 08 **34**

**Legislative  
Developments**

## CHAPTER I

# PRESS FREEDOMS – THREATENED

*Pakistan's press freedom situation: New curbs add to the menace of violence and intimidation.*  
**Waqas Naeem**

## HIGHLIGHTS

Journalist Taha Siddiqui averted attempted kidnapping while he was travelling on the Islamabad highway en route to the airport.<sup>1</sup>

JANUARY  
10

JANUARY  
22



The Express Tribune's subeditor Fawad Hasan was abducted by plainclothesmen as he was leaving a condolence reference for slain professor Hasan Zafar Arif at the Karachi University campus.<sup>2</sup>

Anjum Muneer Raja, a sub-editor for the local Urdu daily Qaumi Pukaar, was fatally shot six times by unknown assailants as he was returning home from work on his motorcycle around midnight.<sup>3</sup>

MARCH  
01

MARCH  
27



Zeeshan Ashraf Butt, a reporter for the national Urdu daily Nawa-i Waqt, was shot dead allegedly by Begowala Union Council chairman Imran Cheema.<sup>4</sup> The murder was committed apparently at Mr. Cheema's office.

- 01 <https://cpj.org/2018/01/pakistani-journalist-taha-siddiqui-escapes-kidnapp.php>
- 02 <https://cpj.org/reports/2018/09/acts-of-intimidation-pakistan-journalists-fear-censorship-violence-military.php>
- 03 <https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2018/03/02/journalist-murdered-in-rawalpindis-high-security-zone-near-ghq/>
- 04 <http://www.journalismpakistan.com/nawa-i-waqt-journalist-zeeshan-ashraf-was-murdered-while-making-phone-call>

Beginning at the end of March, reports emerged that cable operators had either stopped the transmission of Geo News and other channels of the Geo broadcast group or downgraded the broadcasting order of the channels so as to make them inaccessible. After complaints from the group's administration and viewers, the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) ordered cable operators to restore the transmission or else face suspension of their licenses.<sup>5</sup>

APRIL  
02



Broadcast reporter Bilal Sheikh was abducted by local councillor Rai Mohammad Khan, tortured, and illegally detained for an hour in Sheikhpura.<sup>7</sup>

APRIL  
07

Broadcast journalist Asad Khan Betini was beaten up by a group of people he alleged were sent by Balochistan agriculture minister Jaffar Mandokhail.<sup>6</sup>

APRIL  
12

JUNE  
05



Prominent columnist and political commentator Gul Bukhari was abducted by unknown assailants after they intercepted her car on the Sherpao Bridge in Lahore cantonment.<sup>8</sup>



Asad Kharal, an anchor-person for Bol News, was injured when men wearing ski masks intercepted his car in Lahore and assaulted him.<sup>9</sup>

JUNE  
05

05 <https://www.dawn.com/news/1399107>

06 <http://mediamatters.pk/media-matters-for-democracy-condemns-violence-against-journalist-asad-khan-betini-in-balochistan-calls-for-an-independent-inquiry/>

07 <http://mediamatters.pk/bilal-shaikh-of-dawn-news-tortured-political-violence-against-journalists-in-pakistan-on-a-rise-just-before-the-general-elections-2018-media-matters-for-democracy-calls-for-immediate-arrests-of-perp/>

08 <https://www.dawn.com/news/1412220>

09 <https://www.dawn.com/news/1412385>

JULY  
05

The Pakistan Federal Union of Journalist (PFUJ) observed a day of protest at press clubs around the country to condemn unannounced censorship on the news media and incidents of intimidation against journalists and news organisations.<sup>10</sup>



Reporter Sohail Khan, who worked for local daily Kay-2 Times, was ambushed and shot dead by armed men while he was driving in Haripur in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province.<sup>11</sup>

OCTOBER  
16

## A downward spiral difficult to resist and contain

Independent journalism was challenged time and again in Pakistan in 2018 in increasingly severe and troubling ways. The fact that it was election year made the curbs on critical reporting and distribution of news even more sinister and damaging.

Media Matters for Democracy documented at least 51 incidents of threats, attacks, and restrictions against journalists and the news media in Pakistan in 2018. These incidents include five murders: Anjum Muneer Raja of Daily Qaumi Pukaar in Rawalpindi; Zeeshan Ashraf Butt of Nawai Waqt in Begowala; Sohail Khan of Kay-2 Times in Haripur; Abid Hussain of Daily Sagemail in Vehari, and Noorul Hasan of Royal News in Peshawar. Suspects were arrested in the cases of Zeeshan Ashraf Butt and Sohail Khan, but there was little or no information available on the progress of the other murder investigations.

Journalists were subjected to physical attacks and assaults on at least 17 occasions during the year, according to the incidents recorded by Media Matters for Democracy. The assaults included instances of broadcast reporters allegedly beaten up at the behest of elected representatives and their cronies in Zhob, Sheikhpura, and Islamabad. There were at least 11 reports of journalists being harassed and intimidated through verbal threats and aggressive behaviour. Seven cases of abduction, enforced disappearance or attempted kidnapping of journalists were reported from across the country in 2018.

10 <https://www.dawn.com/news/1417821/pfuj-press-freedom-drive-begins-tomorrow>

11 <https://cpj.org/data/people/sohail-khan/index.php>

Media persons faced police or legal action seven times during the same period.

Incidents of violence and intimidation against journalists reporting on local governance and national politics increased prior to the elections. However, perhaps the most chilling reminders of the fragility of press freedom in the country were seen in the form of disruptions to news distribution. Geo News, Pakistan's leading news channel, and Dawn, the country's most influential and longest-running English daily newspaper, faced unlawful restrictions in the run-up to the July general elections.

Geo, often perceived to support the embattled Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) political party, found its transmissions mysteriously blocked or made inaccessible by cable operators in the spring, at a time when the PML-N's leader-for-life Nawaz Sharif was facing corruption references in the accountability courts.

A Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) fact-finding report published in July stated that at least three cable operators told the HRCP they had blocked Geo out of fear, after they received intimidating phone calls by people claiming to be "state or intelligence agency officials" to stop Geo's transmission.<sup>12</sup> The government's regulator and the military denied any role in the suspension of the broadcasts. A Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) special report on Pakistan published in September stated it was "hard to document who made the order and for what reason."<sup>13</sup>

In Dawn's case, the paper's circulation was disrupted in parts of the country in May after it published an interview with Mr. Sharif in which he had hinted at Pakistan's role in the 2009 Mumbai attacks. The HRCP report corroborated Dawn's claim.

The CPJ report stated that fatal attacks on journalists had decreased in Pakistan but "a widespread sense of intimidation has led to self-censorship" of the coverage of militancy, religious extremism, and national security. A 2018 Media Matters for Democracy survey found that 88% of 156 journalist respondents admitted to self-censoring their professional work.<sup>14</sup> A majority of the respondents suggested their self-censorship decisions were likely to be about reporting on the security establishment and religious issues.

The shrinking space for media independence was also evident from the persistent media blackout of an ethnic rights movement, whose leadership has consistently challenged state policies in the erstwhile federally administered tribal regions. Several columnists reported that leading newspapers had refused to carry their opinion pieces in the summer, and the hours-long abduction of Gul Bukhari in July gave the impression, in Ms. Bukhari's own words, that "no one is untouchable, no one is immune" to the consequences of offering critical commentary.<sup>15</sup>

12 <https://www.dawn.com/news/1422135>

13 <https://cpj.org/reports/2018/09/acts-of-intimidation-pakistan-journalists-fear-censorship-violence-military.php>

14 <http://mediamatters.pk/88-pakistani-journalists-self-censor-in-professional-and-79-in-personal-settings-new-research-study-reveals-2/>

15 <http://www.arabnews.com/node/1331961/world>



While coverage of national security, religion, and dissenting political views dominate the self-censorship discussion, many of the Pakistani journalists killed and injured in 2018 were reporting on civic issues, and faced threats from local criminal elements or municipal leaders. Impunity remains widespread in these attacks on journalists – local leaders who threatened or, in one case, are accused of murdering reporters evaded justice.

The news media will have an additional challenge to see off in 2019.

When the new elected government cut several billions of rupees in official advertising spending to the mainstream news media in the second half of 2018, several news organisations claimed to have experienced a severe financial crunch.<sup>16</sup>

It is unclear if this crisis was the sole factor in mass lay-offs at three media groups and the complete shutdown of one broadcast channel. However, the lay-offs and the uncertainty created by the unsustainable advertisement-driven business model of the news media will probably hold the attention of press unions – an unfortunate but inevitable distraction from offering resistance to controls on press freedom. The fear and intimidation caused by the acts against the Pakistani press in 2018 are unlikely to dissipate anytime soon.

### **Regulatory action against content and speech on private broadcast media**

The Pakistan Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) issued at least 131 show cause notices to news and entertainment channels in 2018. For news content, these included notices on the airing of alleged “false news” items related to the federal government during the latter half of the year. It is interesting to note that in some of these instances PEMRA put the burden of proof of the news reports on the news channels after the information ministry denied the developments reported in the media. For example, PEMRA issued a notice to Geo News and Dunya News in October stating that since the information ministry had denied their reported misuse of official power by interior minister Shehryar Afridi therefore the channels needed to provide evidence of their news reports or else issue a public apology repeatedly on their broadcasts. Multiple news channels were served notices to explain their claims of a meeting between Prime Minister Imran Khan and the chairman of the National Accountability Bureau in December, their “irresponsible” coverage of the attack on the Chinese consulate in Karachi in November, their broadcast of a political leader’s speech that cast “aspersions” on state institutions. During the first half of 2018, the show cause notices mostly related to news aired in violation of various court orders or the broadcast of allegedly anti-judiciary content. PEMRA also relayed media-related court orders to the broadcast licensees on several occasions, including directives to: prevent inappropriate content on morning shows, discourage promotion of Valentine’s Day, and stop hate speech against the judiciary. PEMRA also issued at least 25 general advisories for the broadcast media to caution against unverified reports, discussion of sub-judice matters, news reports and programming about crime, and inappropriate entertainment content.

16 <https://www.cjr.org/analysis/journalism-pakistan.php>

## CHAPTER 2

# DIGITAL EXPRESSION RESTRICTED

*Online freedom of expression in 2018: Tracking the threats and incidents.*

**Waqas Naeem**

### HIGHLIGHTS

The family of missing social media activist Samar Abbas, missing for over a year said he had contacted them but had not arrived home yet.<sup>17</sup> He had disappeared from Islamabad in January 2017, around the same time four other had gone missing. The other four had returned after a month.

MARCH  
08



MAY  
03

Haalhawal.com, a Quetta-based website for news and analysis about the Balochistan province, was blocked without notice, its publisher and editor Shabbir Rakhshani told the Journalism Pakistan.<sup>18</sup> Earlier, the liberal news website Naya Daur was also arbitrarily blocked for one week in April.<sup>19</sup> The leftist Awami Workers Party's website would also face a similar three-day suspension in June.<sup>20</sup> While these websites were eventually restored, the Voice of America's Urdu and Pashto websites were apparently permanently blocked by the Pakistan government during 2018 for alleged "false and prejudiced reporting."<sup>21</sup>

ACCESS  
DENIED

17 <https://www.dawn.com/news/1394051>

18 <http://www.journalismpakistan.com/online-newspaper-haalhawal-blocked>

19 <https://twitter.com/nayadaurpk/status/990160757957505024>

20 <http://digitalrightsmonitor.pk/generalelections2018-amidst-shrinking-online-spaces-website-of-awami-workers-party-blocked-in-pakistan/>

21 <http://digitalrightsmonitor.pk/voa-urdu-website-under-sporadic-censorship-across-pakistan/>

The BBC reported the findings of an Amnesty International investigation that revealed Facebook messages and email attachments sent to four Pakistani human rights activists, including Diep Saeeda, contained malware.<sup>22</sup>

MAY  
15



JUNE  
04

The director general (DG) of the Pakistan military's public relations wing claimed in a press conference that social media, especially Twitter, were being used to spread anti-Pakistan propaganda.<sup>23</sup> Major General Asif Ghafoor showed an unsourced graph to suggest that foreign-origin troll accounts engaged in propaganda against Pakistan increased to just over 10,000 in May from a few hundreds in January.<sup>24</sup> The DG also claimed that the country's intelligence service was capable of monitoring social media while showing a social network analysis diagram of an anonymous Twitter account he claimed issued anti-state messages.



JULY  
01



Media Matters for Democracy monitored around 800,000 tweets in 37 trending hashtags related to politics during June 23-30 as

part of its Trends Monitor initiative to investigate manipulative political conversations on Pakistani Twitter.<sup>25</sup> Using a specially designed index, which assigned a 'human bot activity score' to each hashtag based on eight indicators, the Trends Monitor report found that all except one hashtag displayed a "high likelihood of potential on-going hashtag engineering and manipulation."



22 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-44107381>  
23 <https://www.samaa.tv/news/2018/06/we-have-the-capability-to-monitor-social-media-says-dg-ispr/>  
24 <http://digitalrightsmonitor.pk/social-media-being-used-against-pakistan-institutions-dg-ispr/>  
25 <https://digitalrightsmonitor.pk/trendsmonitor/>



AUGUST  
22

Journalist and anchorperson Saleem Safi was subjected to intense trolling and hate speech after he defended former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's claim of spending his own money to cover prime minister house expenses during his tenure.<sup>26</sup>



New information minister Fawad Chaudhry suggested that the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf government intended to scrap existing media

regulatory frameworks and form a new regulatory body that would oversee print, electronic, and social media in the country.<sup>27</sup>

AUGUST  
29

OCTOBER  
18

Web channel Naya Pakistan's owner Hans Masroor and producer Ahsan Saleem were sent on a judicial remand by an anti-terrorism court after they pleaded guilty to the charges of allowing to air anti-judiciary content.<sup>28</sup>

Facebook restricted access to 2,203 pieces of content in Pakistan between January and June 2018 on the request of the PTA, according to its transparency report issued in November.<sup>29</sup> The social media giant said the content was "allegedly violating local laws prohibiting blasphemy, anti-judiciary content, and condemnation of the country's independence."

NOVEMBER  
19



DECEMBER  
13

According to Twitter's transparency report, the Pakistani government sent the micro-blogging website 243 legal demands for content removal, including three requests based on court orders, between January and June 2018 – a ten-fold increase compared to the same six-year period in 2017.<sup>30</sup>

26 <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/361897-journalists-protest-smear-campaign-against-saleem-safi>

27 <https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2018/08/29/pem-ra-pcp-to-be-replaced-by-new-unified-regulator-info-minister-fawad-chaudhry/>

28 <https://www.dawn.com/news/1439821>

29 <https://transparency.facebook.com/content-restrictions/country/PK>

30 <https://transparency.twitter.com/en/removal-requests.html#removal-requests-jan-jun-2018>

## **The project to rein in social media may take shape in 2019**

The government's plans to centralize the regulation of media stand out for their insistence on bringing social media under more direct control. This should be a cause for concern.

Social media have not only cemented their place in Pakistan as the vanguard of avenues for political and personal expression, they have also played an important role in the exercise of the right to freedom of association and peaceful assembly. Facebook pages and posts have helped people keep up with movements that have received little or no coverage on the traditional news media; Twitter and web forums have continued to host political discussions and debate at a time of shrinking physical spaces for dialogue, and user-generated content, especially eyewitness videos, have ensured that information is conveyed quickly and independently.

It has not been smooth sailing, however. The 2018 general elections saw unprecedented levels of co-ordinated political activity on social media, especially Twitter, in Pakistan. As a Media Matters for Democracy research indicated, the majority of trending political topics on Twitter before elections were created or propped up by bulk messages sent through dedicated user accounts that belied the features of organic online conversation. The problem of false information was compounded by the apparently structured disinformation campaigns based on political opposition and the equally damaging misinformation content that mocked and de-contextualized political views.

The current government may use these trends to justify its intention to regulate social media in excess of the criminal provisions already specified in the anti-cybercrimes law. There is no consolation in the irony that the government is led by a political party which was among the first in the country to unlock the political capital of social media and seldom discouraged its own supporters from engaging in spreading disinformation and hate speech online.

The process of Pakistan's increased engagement with prominent social networks Facebook and Twitter had started even before the new government assumed power. As the 2018 transparency reports show, Pakistan's Internet regulator sent more legal demands to the networks in the first half of the year than ever before. The transparency reports only offer an aggregate and unspecified look at the government requests. The nature of the government's dealings with these Internet companies is a matter of opacity at either end of the transaction.

Given that so little is known of which content was requested to be removed and which accounts were specified in the requests, the apparent expansion of content regulation will only undermine the democratising potential of social media.

In absolute terms, it is true that only a small segment of Pakistanis has access to social media. But this limited use is amplified in reach and significance by the mainstream media's tendency to transmit social media commentary to broader audiences, the prolific use of Twitter by political leaders and propagandists, and the discourse generated and informed by human rights defenders, experts, and journalists. A glimpse of the control of social media spaces was evident in 2018 in the form of the temporary blocking of local

websites, the trolling of critical information, and the state's anxiety about online dissent. It is only likely that the state's project to rein in political and personal expression on social media will materialise more fully in 2019.

## CHAPTER 3

# THE SUNSHINE LAWS SHINE BRIGHTER

*A hopeful year for Pakistan's Right to Information (RTI) regime.*

**Waqas Naeem**

## HIGHLIGHTS

The Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) government took back a controversial draft bill designed to amend the provincial right to information law, hours after it had put the bill on the state assembly's legislative agenda.<sup>31</sup> The government's hand was forced by an immediate and fierce criticism of the amendments by RTI advocates and civil society organisations.

FEBRUARY  
27

MAY  
09

In May 2018, Mehboob Qadir Shah was appointed as the chief information commissioner Punjab, and Saeed Akhtar Ansari and Hasan Iqbal as commissioners, resulting in the constitution of the commission after a gap of over one year.<sup>32</sup>

After the Sindh's RTI law remained dysfunctional for over a year, the outgoing government finally approved the appointment of Shahid Gulzar Shaikh as chief information commissioner, and Syed Gul Muneer Shah and Sikandar Ali Huliyo as commissioners.<sup>33</sup>

MAY  
30

31 <http://pakrtidata.org/2018/03/01/shah-farman-kp-rti-amendments-bill-commission-review/>

32 [https://rti.punjab.gov.pk/our\\_commissioners](https://rti.punjab.gov.pk/our_commissioners)

33 <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1832610/1-year-half-sindh-fails-implement-much-touted-rti-law/>

JULY  
02

The Canada-based Centre of Law and Democracy and German development foundation GIZ held a training of trainers with RTI officials and activists in Islamabad to discuss and refine the methodology of an international RTI implementation assessment framework.<sup>34</sup>

Citizens used the KP RTI law in 2017-18 to file over 4,000 information requests, of which around 60% received responses from government departments, according to the KP RTI Commission's annual performance review.<sup>35</sup>

SEPTEMBER  
28

NOVEMBER  
07

The appointments of three information commissioners were approved for the inaugural tenure of the federal information commission in November, a year after the Federal Right of Access to Information Act was passed.<sup>36</sup> However, after general elections in July, a new ruling coalition led by the Pakistan Tehreek-e Insaf formed the central government and decided to appoint its own information commissioners, who will now lead the commission for four years.

## Pakistan's RTI laws: 2018 was good; Can 2019 be better?

Pakistan's second-generation RTI laws have long been considered among the best in the world on paper. The four laws were passed separately at different times between 2013 and 2018 by the central government and three provincial legislatures for their respective jurisdictions. But the Acts, with the exception of the KP law, have struggled to translate their theoretical strengths to a robust practical delivery of the constitutionally-mandated right of access to information. The factors that led to the ineffective implementation of the RTI laws were never obscure. But the KP law's relative success at popularising access

34 <https://www.law-democracy.org/live/pakistan-assessing-implementation-of-the-right-to-information/>

35 <http://pakrtidata.org/2018/09/28/kp-rti-information-commission-annual-report-2018/>

36 <http://pakrtidata.org/2018/11/22/new-federal-information-commission-to-focus-on-maximum-access-rti-awareness-zahid-abdullah/>



to information in the province serves as a good example to highlight the essential flaws in execution elsewhere in the country.

In KP, the RTI Commission developed a proactive zeal to raise awareness and deliver training about the right of the citizens and the duty of the government officials. It was obviously helpful that the commission was allowed to operate without disruptions, and established its administrative protocols along professional lines to maximise efficiency in responding to citizen complaints. The commission seems to have developed teeth to challenge the non-provision of records in response to information requests, and often considers innovative ways to increase the public uptake of the law.

In Punjab, the commission's efforts to challenge bureaucratic apathy and develop an appreciation among the public for the RTI was severely disrupted when the government ignored the appointment of new commissioners for 13 months. Sindh and the federal government never bothered to constitute the information commissions, which also put a question mark about their motivation to pass their respective RTI laws in the first place.

The year 2018 was therefore monumentally significant for Pakistan's national and sub-national RTI regimes. The longstanding demands of RTI advocates were finally granted when governments in the centre, Punjab, and Sindh appointed commissioners to lead their respective RTI commissions. The commissioners now need the support of the government in the form of operating budgets, office space, and administrative backing for them to meaningfully improve the RTI implementation situation.

Balochistan remains the RTI backwater of the country as it is still stuck with a clearly broken first-generation access-to-information ordinance. The provincial information department reportedly worked on the draft of a new and more progressive RTI law in 2018 but it never made it to the provincial assembly for debate and voting. RTI advocacy needs to focus on Balochistan to tackle the current challenges to access to information there.

More collaboration among the provincial RTI commissions in 2019 could help them learn from each other's experience and develop better strategies to keep chipping away at the endemic culture of non-transparent governance among Pakistan's bureaucracy. A renewed push by the civil society to raise public awareness about RTI's role in government accountability can always prove to be useful. The commissions and activists might also need to maintain pressure upon governments to improve the overall access to information for the citizens and avoid any backsliding on their RTI commitments.

## CHAPTER 4

# CONNECTION DISRUPTED

*Network shutdowns continue to hamper life and liberty in Pakistan: Timeline*  
**Talal Raza**

### HIGHLIGHTS

Islamabad High Court's single bench headed by Justice Athar Minallah declared suspension of cellular services illegal in response to a petition filed in 2016. Later, a stay was granted against the verdict on March 19 after an intra-court appeal was filed by the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) and the Ministry of Information Technology and Telecommunication.<sup>37</sup>

FEBRUARY  
02

MARCH  
20

After a year, mobile internet services were restored in four districts of Balochistan including Chaman, Kharan, Dalbandin, and Pishin. However, they remain suspended in three districts: Kalat, Awaran, and Kech. The mobile internet services were suspended in these districts In February 2017.<sup>38</sup>

Mobile phone services were restored In Wana tehsil of South Waziristan after 10 years. They were suspended after the Pakistan Army launched a military operation against the militants there in 2009.<sup>39</sup>

JUNE  
01

Mobile network not available

OK

37 <http://digitalrightsmonitor.pk/mobile-phone-services-briefly-suspended-in-parts-of-rawalpindi-islamabad-restored-after-four-hours/>

38 <https://propakistani.pk/2018/11/24/parliamentary-panels-asks-for-a-mechanism-for-closure-of-mobile-services-in-some-areas/>

39 <http://www.radio.gov.pk/11-06-2018/mobile-phone-service-restored-in-wana-south-waziristan>

JULY  
13

Mobile services were switched off in specific areas of Lahore including the airport, walled city area, Shahdara, Burki, and Nawab Town, during rallies by PML-N to welcome former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and his daughter Maryam Nawaz Sharif. They were coming back to Pakistan after an accountability court sentenced them to prison in a corruption case.<sup>40</sup>

Mobile internet services were suspended in three districts of Balochistan, including Pishin, Killa Abdullah, and Mastung, until July 31 ahead of general elections on July 25.<sup>41</sup>

JULY  
21

SEPTEMBER  
19 - 21

Partial network shutdown affected different cities in Pakistan including Karachi, Lahore, Faisalabad, Peshawar, Quetta, Islamabad, and Lahore, during Ashura processions. In Sindh, mobile services remained suspended from 7 AM to midnight. In Islamabad, the services remained suspended from 9 AM to 9 PM on 20 and 21 September.<sup>42</sup>

Mobile phone services were suspended for a few hours in the wake of Chehlum of Hazrat Imam Hussain (RA). The cities affected as a result of the suspension included Hyderabad, Sukkur, Khairpur, Jacobabad, Shikarpur, Lahore, Rawalpindi, Jehlum, Sargodha, Sialkot, Gujrat, Narowal, Multan, Sahiwal, Rahimyar Khan, Okara, and Pakpattan.<sup>43</sup>

OCTOBER  
30

40 <https://digitalrightsmonitor.pk/mobile-service-suspension-requested-in-lahore/>

41 <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/344251-mobile-internet-service-in-six-districts-of-balochistan-suspended>

42 <http://digitalrightsmonitor.pk/partial-network-shutdown-in-different-parts-of-pakistan-owing-to-ashura/>

43 <https://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/387157-mobile-phone-services-to-remain-suspended-today>

No Service

NOVEMBER  
02

: As protests by religious groups started against the acquittal of blasphemy accused Asia Bibi, mobile phone services were suspended in different cities for more than 10 hours.<sup>44</sup>

Cellular services partially remained suspended for few hours in different cities including Quetta, Rawalpindi, and Karachi, on 12 Rabi ul Awal as processions were carried out across the country to mark the birth of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).<sup>45</sup>

NOVEMBER  
21

NOVEMBER  
23

A Senate sub-committee on IT called suspension of mobile internet in FATA and Balochistan a denial of basic human rights. The sub-committee was formed in September to look into the suspension of data services in three districts of Balochistan.<sup>46 47</sup>

SMS

### The year of resisting network shutdowns

During the year 2018, there were some positive developments that indicated the willingness of different stakeholders to understand the implications of network shutdowns on citizens. However, some developments also indicated that, at some level, the government bodies continued to resist efforts for discontinuation of the policy of suspending cellular services. Perhaps this is why on one hand cellular services were suspended on numerous occasions and on the other, mobile and data services were restored in some areas after more than a year.

The year 2018 started on a high note as the Islamabad High Court declared cellular network shutdowns illegal and contrary to the Pakistan Telecommunication Act. The

44 <http://digitalrightsmonitor.pk/pro-test-against-the-asia-bibis-acquittal-cellular-services-suspended-for-few-hours/>  
45 <http://digitalrightsmonitor.pk/keepiton-partial-network-shutdown-in-the-wake-of-rabi-ul-awal-processions/>  
46 <https://www.dawn.com/news/1447331>  
47 <https://propakistani.pk/2018/11/24/parliamentary-panels-asks-for-a-mechanism-for-closure-of-mobile-services-in-some-areas/>

decision was welcomed with jubilation by rights activists and citizens, hoping that this would bring to a halt the frequent cellular services suspension. However, the happiness was short-lived as the government managed to get a stay on this decision through an intra-court appeal. This allowed them to later suspend cellular services on at least seven different occasions citing security reasons.

Similarly, there were some good developments pertaining to Balochistan and the tribal areas. Mobile internet was restored in three districts of Balochistan after a lapse of one year. However, some districts are still without mobile internet for nearly two years. The matter was also brought to the attention of the Senate Committee on Information Technology. However, it seems that apart from recognising it as a “basic right” of the citizens, the senators could not do much in getting the services restored in those areas.

Additionally, it was also observed that the network shutdowns were more measured in 2018. This means that unlike in the past where services would be suspended for days, the authorities either suspended these services for few hours and, in some cases, a whole city did not experience the network shutdown. For instance, residents of Islamabad and Rawalpindi had experienced prolonged suspension of mobile phone services in 2016. However, in 2018, mobile services were suspended only for four hours during the time of the Pakistan Day parade. Also, some areas that were located away from the military parade’s venue did not experience shutdown at all. The same was observed during shutdowns on other occasions. However, it cannot be said whether the change in the approach is due to the awareness within government or generally because the security situation of the country has also improved over the years.

Amidst all of this, the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) and provincial home departments did not do a good job in ensuring transparency around the network shutdowns.

By law, the cellular suspensions are preceded by official notifications. However, on several occasions, the public and the media did not receive any notice. For the sake of transparency, PTA should be more open about publicly sharing the notification, which should not only specify the reason but also the time during which the services would remain suspended. Publishing these notices on PTA’s website is one of the ways to go about it.

## CHAPTER 5

# DATA PROTECTION - NON EXISTENTS

*Data remains vulnerable In Pakistan.*  
**Talal Raza**

### HIGHLIGHTS

Customers of United Bank Limited (UBL) lost money owing to ATM skimming. Talking to Digital Rights Monitor, a UBL representative acknowledged that some customers even lost between Rs. 800,000 to Rs. 120,000 owing to illegal transactions.<sup>48</sup>

JANUARY  
22

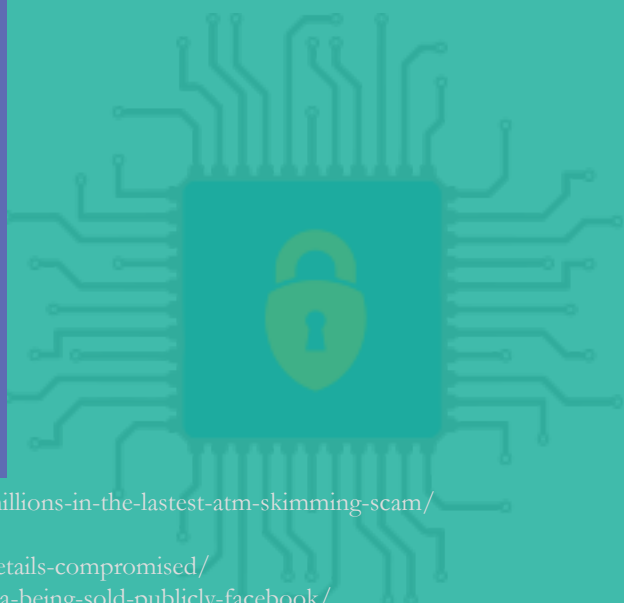


APRIL  
23

Ride-hailing service Careem encountered a data breach affecting 14 million people across 14 countries. While the company insisted that there was “no evidence” of credit card details and passwords being compromised in this breach, the hackers had access to names, email addresses, phone numbers, and the trip data of customers and captains.<sup>49</sup>

Reports of personal information of Pakistanis allegedly being sold over Facebook emerged, stating that information leaked Punjab Information Technology Board (PITB) database was being sold online. It was said that that some PITB officials might have provided access to the NADRA data to unauthorised individuals. However, the then-PITB Chairman Umar Saif denied these allegations and threatened to take legal action against those spreading false information about PITB.<sup>50</sup>

MAY  
07



48 <http://digitalrightsmonitor.pk/ubl-customers-have-lost-millions-in-the-latest-atm-skimming-scam/>

49 <https://digitalrightsmonitor.pk/careem-under-cyber-attack-management-claims-no-passwords-and-credit-card-details-compromised/>

50 <https://www.techjuice.pk/nadra-police-telcos-citizens-data-being-sold-publicly-facebook/>

MAY  
25

European data protection law General Data Protection Regulation came into effect in Europe. The law has wide-ranging implications even for entities outside of the European Union (EU) that may process data of EU residents.<sup>51</sup>

The first draft of a data protection bill was shared publicly by the Ministry of Information Technology and Telecommunication.<sup>52</sup>

JULY  
11

SEPTEMBER  
28

Around 90 million Facebook users, including those from Pakistan, were logged out of their accounts after a vulnerability was discovered within the “View as” feature of the social network’s app. Facebook said that there was no evidence of credit card details stolen and that the vulnerability was patched.<sup>53</sup>



Hacking of Bank Islami banking data resulted in the loss of Rs. 2.6 million to customers. Immediately after the hack, at least 10

Pakistani banks reportedly suspended their international payment mechanisms amid unconfirmed reports that their data were compromised.<sup>54</sup> Later the Minister of State for Revenue Hammad Azhar shared that around US\$ 6 million were lost within 23 minutes as a result of hacking of 6,000 BankIslami accounts.<sup>55</sup>

OCTOBER  
26

- 51 <http://digitalrightsmonitor.pk/general-data-protection-regulation-a-brief-overview/>
- 52 <https://moitt.gov.pk/userfiles1/file/PERSONAL-DATA-PROTECTION-BILL-July-18-Draft.pdf>
- 53 <http://digitalrightsmonitor.pk/facebookhack-vulnerability-fixed-no-evidence-found-to-establish-hackers-accessed-externals-apps-using-fb-login-says-facebook/>
- 54 <http://digitalrightsmonitor.pk/ten-pakistani-banks-suspend-international-banking-in-the-wake-of-possible-cyber-attack/>
- 55 <https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2018/12/21/bankislami-lost-6m-within-23-minutes-in-cyber-attack/>

NOVEMBER  
06 - 07

A report by a cyber-security firm claimed that 19,864 credit card details of users affiliated with 22 Pakistani banks was being sold over the dark web. A Federal Investigation Agency official claimed that data of almost all banks were hacked. The State Bank of Pakistan denied this statement<sup>56</sup> but directed banks to carry out third-party assessments and also conduct biometric verification of customers.<sup>57</sup>

Around 1,244 cases of online banking fraud, including unauthorised transactions made either via ATMs or internet bankin were reported from 1 January to 8 November 2018, according to figures shared in the Senate by Minister of State for Interior Shehryar Afridi.<sup>58</sup>

DECEMBER  
20

### **Another year without a data protection regime**

Another year has passed and Pakistan still remains without a data protection regime. Despite the fact that data breaches involving government and private entities have continued to take place in 2018, there is no outlet where those housing personal data of millions of Pakistanis could be held accountable and penalised.

The year 2018 witnessed many data breaches involving local Pakistani banks, allowing alleged hackers to steal the personal information and money from bank accounts. The criminal elements used a series of methods to access and misuse banking data of Pakistani citizens. For instance, some of the data was stolen through skimming devices installed at the ATM machines. Some got hold of banking data of people by gathering the data over phone while impersonating as either Army officials or representatives of the State Bank.<sup>59</sup> In at least one instance, a cyber attack involving BankIslami Pakistan resulted in huge financial losses to customers. The breaches involving banks has apparently sparked a widespread revamping of the banks' internal systems as they are

56 <http://digitalrightsmonitor.pk/confusion-looms-around-alleged-hacking-of-banking-data-in-pakistan/>

57 <http://digitalrightsmonitor.pk/ten-pakistani-banks-suspend-international-banking-in-the-wake-of-possible-cyber-attack/>

58 <http://digitalrightsmonitor.pk/1244-online-banking-fraud-complaints-reported-in-2018-interior-ministry-informs-senate/>

59 <https://www.dawn.com/news/1445483>.



now moving towards conducting their own internal assessments and gathering biometric data of their clients. However, one wonders how such measures could contribute towards raising awareness among the consumers and prevent yet another breach. It is commendable that some banks started sending out text messages to their clients warning about the impersonators. However, there is a lot more that the authorities concerned could do in educating the people about protecting their banking data apart from taking technical cyber security measures.

Additionally, there were some global data breaches involving companies such as Facebook and Careem that also affected Pakistani users. However, it is worrying to note that the corporations involved in breaches refused to specify how many Pakistani customers were affected in these incidents when Digital Rights Monitor reached out to them. This indicates their lack of interest in being more transparent towards the Pakistani consumers. While corporations refused to delve into details of the breaches, the Punjab Information Technology Board Chairman went one step further and began to threaten news outlets for publishing reports about an alleged data breach involving the board.

All this boils down to one issue: Pakistan needs a robust data protection regime. This is needed to ensure that the aforementioned entities are taking adequate steps to protect consumer data and that they are also transparent towards Pakistanis about the data handling practices.

On a positive note, the Ministry of Information Technology and Telecommunication finally shared the first draft of a data protection bill in July 2018 and sought suggestions from experts on it. However, experts believe that significant improvements are required for the draft. In this regard, the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation is a good precedent to identify the gaps within the draft. Let's hope that 2019 would be the year when the Parliament makes progress towards putting an effective data protection law in place after incorporating feedback of all the stakeholders.

## CHAPTER 6

# DISINFORMATION - A POLITICAL TOOL

*Online disinformation rings alarm bells during the election year.*

**Talal Raza**

### HIGHLIGHTS

A false news report published on a website called Eurasia Future accused PML-N leader Nawaz Sharif of hiring the infamous data-mining company Cambridge Analytica to manipulate the 2018 general elections in his favour. The false report went viral on social media and was also discussed by the mainstream media.<sup>60</sup>

MARCH  
28



A fake WhatsApp message went viral on social media stating that Kulsoom Nawaz, the wife of former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, was dead. The message fuelled the existing conspiracy theory that Nawaz Sharif was pretending his wife was still hospitalised to hide in London and evade accountability. Mr. Sharif returned to Pakistan to face arrest in July, and Mrs. Nawaz passed away in September 2018.

JUNE  
14

Media Matters for Democracy (MMfD) wrote an open letter to Facebook and Twitter urging them to take concrete steps to discourage and counter the spread of misinformation on their social networks ahead of Pakistan's general elections.<sup>61</sup>

JUNE  
26



60 <https://medium.com/@nayadaurpk/fake-news-alert-nawaz-sharif-has-not-hired-cambridge-analytica-bf3e3dd1f8c>

61 <http://digitalrightsmonitor.pk/an-open-letter-to-mark-zuckerberg-and-jack-dorsey-the-ceos-of-facebook-and-twitter-ahead-of-general-elections-in-pakistan-asking-them-to-rise-up-to-the-challenge-of-countering-online-misinformation/>

JUNE  
26

A writ petition filed in the Lahore High Court sought directives to the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) and the Election Commission of Pakistan to contact Facebook officials and urge them to control false news and fake accounts on the social networking platform.<sup>62</sup>

Keeping in view the rising cases of deliberate online misinformation and incitement to political and religious violence in online political campaigns, MMfD requested the Election Commission of Pakistan to ensure the implementation of its code of content for political parties in online spaces as well, and take measures to counter election-related online misinformation.<sup>63</sup>

JULY  
07

JULY  
11

Ahead of Pakistan's general elections, Facebook collaborated with two civil society organisations, MMfD and Shehri, to run an online campaign against misinformation. MMfD helped translate and contextualise their tips on spotting misinformation in Urdu.<sup>64</sup>

Ministry of Information, Broadcasting, and Cultural Heritage set up a Twitter handle to debunk fake news. The Twitter handle @FakeNews\_Buster was created after multiple instances of false news targeting the newly elected Pakistan Tehreek-e Insaf government had surfaced on social media.<sup>65</sup>

OCTOBER  
01

- 62 <http://digitalrightsmonitor.pk/petition-filed-in-lahore-high-court-to-curtail-misinformation-on-facebook/>
- 63 <http://digitalrightsmonitor.pk/media-matters-for-democracy-writes-a-letter-to-the-election-commission-of-pakistan-to-curb-the-spread-of-election-related-online-misinformation-ensure-implementation-of-coc-for-political-parties-in-o/>
- 64 <http://digitalrightsmonitor.pk/general-elections-2018-media-matters-for-democracy-partners-with-facebook-to-push-back-against-misinformation/>
- 65 <http://digitalrightsmonitor.pk/information-ministry-launches-twitter-handle-to-counter-fake-news/>



DECEMBER  
03 - 04

A Facebook delegation met Prime Minister Imran Khan<sup>66</sup> and Federal Minister for Human Rights Shireen Mazari during their visit to Pakistan. The Pakistani leadership urged the delegation to take measures to curtail the spread of false information on the social network.<sup>67</sup>

### **Dislodging disinformation in Pakistan: An uphill task**

The concerns around disinformation heightened around the world after evidence surfaced about how similar online campaigns were instrumental in influencing the 2016 US Presidential elections. Given that a significant chunk of population use social media in Pakistan, some quarters seemed concerned about the possible implications of disinformation on Pakistan's general elections in July 2018. These apprehensions did not seem overblown as numerous false news items went viral on social media and were also covered by the mainstream media. Notable among these were false reports about the hiring of Cambridge Analytica by Nawaz Sharif to influence elections and tweets from accounts impersonating renowned personalities including film star Shabnam and French President Emmanuel Macron.

While there is not enough evidence to pin down the biggest perpetrator of disinformation in Pakistan, it is clear that these disinformation campaigns are well-organised and target all the stakeholders across the spectrum including political parties, the military, journalists, and human rights activists. The aforementioned instances have sparked a debate on how Pakistanis can avoid getting deceived by these disinformation campaigns.

The new government led by Pakistan Tehreek-e Insaf responded to the challenge by setting up a Twitter account to debunk false information circulating on social media. They also held a series of meetings with Facebook and urged officials from the social network to put in place mechanisms to check the disinformation problem. The government is in the process of introducing a new media regulator called Pakistan Media Regulatory Authority that would also regulate social media.

Meanwhile, Facebook engaged with different stakeholders, including government and civil society, to address the false news problem. Following the Cambridge Analytica

66 <http://digitalrightsmonitor.pk/facebook-delegation-calls-on-prime-minister-imran-khan/>

67 <http://digitalrightsmonitor.pk/facebook-delegation-calls-on-pakistans-minister-for-human-rights/>

revelations, facebook had been under a lot of pressure globally for not doing enough to stop the spread of disinformation through their platforms including WhatsApp. Facebook representatives met government representatives to know more about their desires, they also collaborated with civil society to run a public awareness campaign against misinformation ahead of the elections.

In the midst of all of these initiatives, it looks as if there were not enough efforts to understand the scope and impact of these disinformation campaigns on Pakistan during 2018. It is understandable as the issue is nascent and might require some time before the implications are understood comprehensively. Nevertheless, moving forward, it is imperative that more resources are allocated for understanding the consequences of disinformation for the Pakistani political landscape. Without comprehending the complexities surrounding the issue, any strategy to curtail online disinformation might not be effective.

## CHAPTER 7

# CYBERCRIMINALS – TARGETING THE VULNERABLE

*Women and children remain key victims of cybercrime*

**Salwa Rana**

### HIGHLIGHTS

A middle-aged man, accused of sexually assaulting and filming minor girls, was arrested by FIA in Lahore, after being exposed by the team of Sar-e-aam, a TV show aired on ARY News.<sup>68</sup>

**JANUARY  
18**

**FEBRUARY  
27**

The FIA arrested and initiated proceedings against a Faisalabad man for alleged harassment and blackmail of a women for money and sexual favors.<sup>69</sup>

Police arrested two people in Gujranwala, allegedly involved in assaulting and videotaping minor girls.<sup>70</sup>

**MARCH  
16**

**MARCH  
09**

A man was sentenced to six years in prison and fined Rs. 0.7 million for harassing and blackmailing the wife of an Air Force officer in Bahawalpur by manipulating her pictures.<sup>71</sup>

68 <https://arynews.tv/en/lahore-man-sexual-abuse-minor-girls/>

69 <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1646047/1-fia-arrests-faisalabad-man-accused-cyber-harassment/>

70 <https://www.dawn.com/news/1395530>

71 <https://www.dawn.com/news/1394183>

A senior Punjab Police officer was declared absconder by the FIA after a case was registered against him for uploading his wife's private pictures and videos on social media using a fake account with the help of a friend.<sup>72</sup>

APRIL  
16

JUNE  
15

A second-year medical student in Nowshera was arrested and charged under PECA after complaints were registered against him for blackmailing girls through manipulated pictures.<sup>73</sup>

A man was arrested in Lahore for offences committed under PECA for blackmailing a woman and threatening to damage her reputation online by sending her morphed pictures to her relatives.<sup>74</sup>

AUGUST  
08

OCTOBER  
03

The Establishment Division dismissed a police officer from service on the recommendation of the Federal Ombudsperson for Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace. The ombudsperson had found the officer guilty of severely harassing his ex-wife on online forums, such as Facebook and LinkedIn.<sup>75</sup>

The FIA revealed that they had received a complaint from Spain of a Pakistani man being involved in an international child pornography ring. This led to a crackdown against those involved in the crime and resulted in the arrest of one culprit from Karachi.<sup>76</sup> The FIA also arrested a middle-aged man in Karachi, accused of sexually abusing children and filming the assault.<sup>77</sup>

DECEMBER  
05

- 72 <https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2018/04/20/fia-arrests-man-for-allegedly-blackmailing-women-report/>  
73 <https://www.dawn.com/news/1414212>  
74 <https://www.techjuice.pk/fia-arrests-a-man-in-lahore-for-blackmailing-a-lady-on-facebook/>  
75 <https://www.dawn.com/news/1458385/police-officer-sacked-for-harassing-ex-wife-online>  
76 <https://www.geo.tv/latest/220806-received-foreign-complaint-of-pakistani-mans-involvement-in-child-porn-ring-dg-fia>  
77 <https://dailytimes.com.pk/337843/fia-arrests-man-for-sexually-molesting-children-and-filming-them/>

DECEMBER  
03 - 04

A man was charged under Section 14, 21, and 24 of PECA after complaints emerged that he lured widows and divorcees into marrying him and then extorted money from them. One victim reported that he had tricked her into performing Nikkah with him, after which he blackmailed her with her objectionable video for money.<sup>78</sup>

### Burgeoning cybercrimes in Pakistan

Pakistan saw a surge in reported cybercrimes in 2018, with the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) reporting that by October it had conducted 2,295 inquiries, registered 255 cases and made 209 arrests during the year.<sup>79</sup> The figures are at an all-time high ever since the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) 2016 came into force. In Lahore alone, 5,500 complaints were registered.<sup>80</sup> In Sindh, 3,235 complaints were registered, mostly related to blackmailing, fraud and hacking.<sup>81</sup>

Women appeared to be the most targeted group of people for online harassment. Most of the harassment cases involved intimidation, and dissemination of private data such as pictures and phone numbers. In a large number of cases, these pictures were morphed onto pornographic images which were then used to blackmail the victims for money. This explains why many women refrain from putting their photos online and those who do, try to take steps to maintain their privacy.

In addition to this, many females fall victim to predators who befriend them online, through Facebook or any other social media platform, solely for the purposes of harassment. These predators first develop a relationship of trust with the victims and then exploit them by using their pictures, addresses or phone numbers. Some NGOs and civil society organizations are working to help women deal with such issues, by providing assistance in areas ranging from providing basic online safety training to specialized legal assistance. Nevertheless, a large chunk of the population is unable to guard their online presence. This is especially true for less developed areas with access to the Internet. Even though the laws dealing with these problems are in place, it is the practicalities of implementation that need to be addressed.

79 <https://www.dawn.com/news/1440854>

80 <https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2018/11/15/5500-cyber-crime-complaints-registered-with-fia-in-lahore-this-year/>

81 <https://www.samaa.tv/news/2019/01/3236-written-cybercrime-complaints-were-registered-in-sindh-in-2018/>



There has been a massive influx of cybercrime cases coming to the courts since the passage of PECA in 2016. The FIA has been in action throughout the year. While the Agency can congratulate itself on some big achievements this year like the crackdown on the child pornography wing, there still remains room for improvement. A number of cybercrime cases are still pending before courts and due to the lack of investigators and prosecutors, the progress of these cases is extremely slow. The Agency continuously struggles to keep up with the challenges posed by the threats to cyber security. There needs to be a more proper allocation of funds, as per the needs, to the Agency so that it is able to carry out its functions more efficiently.

## CHAPTER 8

# LEGISLATIVE DEVELOPMENTS

*Cyber policies show government's intent to innovate on technological front*  
**Salwa Rana**

### HIGHLIGHTS

The Federal Cabinet approved the first every Digital Pakistan Policy. The policy offers a number of incentives to IT sector including income tax holiday, 5% cash reward on IT export remittances and also envision putting in place IT interventions in various other government departments.<sup>82</sup>

MAY  
23

MAY  
31

The Punjab Cabinet, on the last day of its tenure, approved its first IT policy. According to this, a Digital Advocacy Task Force will be set up which will give recommendations to the Government around challenges pertaining to cyber-crimes. Moreover, it committed to increase Internet access to everyone, launch a digital literacy program, lobby for and facilitate e-commerce and work on a data protection policy.<sup>83</sup>

The Government introduced the National Internal Security Policy 2018 – 2023, which focuses on cyber threats and security related matters. It promises to develop a National Cyber Security Strategy to secure services and infrastructure from cyber-attacks.<sup>84</sup>

JUNE  
01

82 <https://www.techjuice.pk/first-digital-policy-pakistan-approved-federal-cabinet>.

83 <https://digitalrightsmonitor.pk/hours-before-completion-of-its-term-punjab-cabinet-approves-punjab-first-it-policy/>

84 <https://digitalrightsmonitor.pk/nisp-2018-how-pakistan-new-internal-security-policy-perceives-cyber-threats/>

The Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf unveiled its digital policy as part of their election manifesto, after consultation with the IT industry and other stakeholders. The policy stressed on creation of more jobs for youth in the field of IT, enhance country's IT exports and promote E-governance to control corruption.<sup>85</sup>

JULY  
03

JUNE  
11

The Ministry of Information Technology and Telecom (MOITT) shared the first draft of Personal Data Protection Bill on its website. Different versions of the bill have been shared on the website, but it is yet to be tabled in the Assembly.

The MOITT notified the rules for the implementation of the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act 2016. However, they were not shared with the public until January 2019 for unknown reasons.<sup>86</sup>

AUGUST  
07

SEPTEMBER  
28

The MOITT proposed an amendment to the PECA 2016, which consisted of six new clauses to be included in the statute. These were related to online pornography and blasphemy. However, the highlight of the amendment was the introduction of capital punishment for those who make false accusations of blasphemy.<sup>87</sup> The amendment received criticism from members of the Senate Standing Committee on Information Technology and Telecommunication who suggested that aforementioned issues should not be brought within the ambit of law.<sup>88</sup>

85 <https://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/337044-pti-launches-digital-policy-as-part-election-manifesto>

86 <https://digitalrightsmonitor.pk/rules-for-the-implementation-of-peca-notified/>

87 <https://digitalrightsmonitor.pk/new-peca-amendment-bill-capital-punishment-for-online-blasphemy-and-false-accusations-of-blasphemy-proposed/>

88 <https://propakistani.pk/2018/10/13/pti-moves-to-withdraw-the-amendment-to-cyber-crimes-bill-2018/>

NOVEMBER  
23

The Khyber-Pakhunkhwa launched its first digital policy for the province for the next five years (2018-2023). The policy promises to convert broadband services from copper networks to optical fiber network and reduce tax on mobile and internet services to encourage the use of internet in the province.<sup>89</sup>

### Gauging government's intent through cyber policies

During the year 2018, no significant piece of legislation related to cyberspace was passed by the parliament. However, the Federal and provincial governments introduced multiple digital policies, dealing with different aspects of technology. The government has expressed its intent to improve the internet access even in small villages and towns in some of these policies. It is yet to be seen if the government will be able to keep up with the promises made and ensure that more Pakistanis have access to internet in the year 2019.

Different policies also show intent to strengthen cyber security capabilities in light of the growing challenges of cyber-security and the presence of proscribed organizations online. The National Internal Security 2018-2023 is reflective of the growing security concerns and perceived vulnerability of Pakistan's cyberspace. Additionally, Pakistan's first ever-National Centre for Cyber Security was established at Air University in Islamabad. The center comprises of tech and Internet experts from all over the country. The role of the center is to develop advanced tools and research technologies that will deal with cyber-attacks and can ensure protection of Pakistan's cyber-space.<sup>90</sup>

2018 was also an important year with regards to implementation of electronic crimes law, as the much-awaited rules for implementation of PECA were finally notified - two years after the Act came into force. Strangely enough, the rules have not been publicly shared. There was an attempt to introduce a controversial amendment in PECA that sought to introduce death penalties for those found guilty of blasphemy or those found guilty of wrongly accusing others of blasphemy online. While the status of the proposed amendment is not clear, it received criticism within the Senate's standing committee, that held that issue of blasphemy should not be brought within the ambit of cyber law.

There has been some progress over Personal Data Protection legislation. While the bill

89 <https://digitalrightsmonitor.pk/kpk-launches-its-first-digital-policy/>

90 <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/319672-nccs-to-develop-tools-to-protect-pakistan-s-cyber-space>

has yet to be tabled, the government made public different versions of the law for stakeholder input. Different stakeholders including civil society and private sector continued to engage in discussions around the bill to identify loopholes and recommend improvements. There are fair chances that the bill will become a law in 2019. It is hoped that the suggestions put forth by civil society is given due consideration by the government before the bill is tabled in the assembly.

## About Media Matters for Democracy

Media Matters for Democracy works to defend the freedom of expression, media, Internet, and communications in Pakistan. The main premise of our work is to push for a truly independent and inclusive media and cyberspace where the citizens in general, and journalists in specific, can exercise their fundamental rights and professional duties safely and without the fear of persecution or physical harm.

We undertake various initiatives including but not limited to training, policy research, advocacy, movement building and strategic litigation to further our organizational goals. We also work on acceptance and integration of digital media and journalism technologies and towards creating sustainable 'media-tech' initiatives in the country.

MMfD recognises diversity and inclusion as a core value of democracy and thus all our programs have a strong focus on fostering values and skills that enable and empower women, minority communities, and other marginalized groups.

