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Pakistan: International and Local Civil Society Appeal to End Restrictions on Freedom of Expression in Pakistan

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International and Local Civil Society Appeal to End Restrictions on Freedom of Expression in Pakistan

4 August 2026

To:

Prime Minister Muhammad Shehbaz Sharif
Federal Minister for Information and Broadcasting Attaullah Tarar
Federal Minister for Law and Justice Azam Nazeer Tarar

We, the undersigned local and international civil society organisations, urge Pakistan's authorities to end the escalating restrictions on the right to freedom of expression, including press freedom, access to information, and human rights advocacy.

Pakistan is bound by Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which protects the freedom to seek, receive and impart information. Any restriction must be clearly provided by law, and necessary and proportionate to achieve a legitimate aim. The UN Human Rights Committee has affirmed that a free and unhindered press must be able to report on public affairs without censorship or restraint.

The latest summons under the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, 2016 (PECA) issued by the National Cyber Crime Investigation Agency to journalist **Asad Ali Toor** under section 26A, concerning allegedly "false" information, is part of a broader pattern of using vague cybercrime provisions to criminalise protected expression and intimidate critical voices.

Previously, PECA notices have also been issued to *Dawn* journalist **Muhammad Akbar Notezai**; Lahore Press Club President **Arshad Ansari**; journalists **Mujahid Sheikh, Sheraz Nisar, Ahmad Faraz, Yasir Shamoun, and Waseem Sabir**; and lawyer **Tariq Afghan**. The law must not be used to criminalise journalism, legal advocacy, political criticism or human rights reporting.

We are equally concerned regarding pressure from the Pakistani authorities on television journalists and management structure of media organisations. Journalist unions and rights groups have described the removal of journalist **Munizae Jahangir's** television news and politics programme after 11 years of broadcast on Aaj TV as retaliation for her reporting on topics

considered too sensitive, including an interview with the Leader of the Opposition. This follows the sudden sacking of journalist **Matiullah Jan** from Neo News earlier this year, reportedly due to similar pressure by the authorities, and the reported removal from air of anchorperson **Kashif Abbasi**. This is part of a wider pattern of forced silence. In 2021, journalist **Hamid Mir** was suspended by Geo News after speaking at a protest supporting an attacked journalist.

This climate is reinforced by Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority's (PEMRA) use of suspensions, fines and employment-related directives. In July 2026, Geo News was penalised with a 15-day suspension and a PKR 10 million fine for airing a documentary that sparked a debate about its content amounting to blasphemy. PEMRA also directed disciplinary proceedings and the dismissal of staff found responsible. Such measures can create pressure throughout the broadcast industry and encourage self-censorship by producers.

Human rights lawyers **Imaan Zainab Mazari-Hazir** and **Hadi Ali Chattha** have remained imprisoned since 23 January 2026 following proceedings under PECA concerning their social media posts. Their sentence and detention violate the lawyers' right to freedom of expression under international human rights law and standards, including Principle 23 of the United Nations Basic Principles on the Role of Lawyers. Their appeals and sentence-suspension applications have not received substantive determination by the courts, despite a Supreme Court direction in May that the Islamabad High Court decide the matter within two weeks. On 28 July, their lawyers again sought an urgent hearing.

In Pakistan-administered Jammu and Kashmir, internet services were suspended on 5 June 2026. Broadband was only partially restored on 29 July, while mobile data disruption continues. Blanket shutdowns obstruct journalism, access to essential services, and the documentation of human rights violations. Blocking Al Jazeera's news website in Pakistan on 2 August further limits access to independent information and amounts to retaliation for its critical reporting regarding the protests in Pakistan-administered Jammu and Kashmir.[1] Additionally, the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting's notification of the Foreign Media Facilitation Guidelines, 2026 places onerous restrictions on reporting by foreign journalists outside of the three major cities, Lahore, Karachi and Islamabad, by requiring them to obtain a No Objection Certificate from the External Publicity Wing of the Ministry.

We call on the Government of Pakistan and relevant authorities to:

1. **Withdraw the notice against Asad Toor** and all PECA notices, investigations and prosecutions based solely on protected journalism, criticism, legal advocacy or human rights work.

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[1] Ministry of Information & Broadcasting, 2 August 2026, https://x.com/MoIB_Official/status/2083942493788557316

2. **Repeal Section 26A** and other vague PECA provisions; remove custodial penalties for allegedly false information; and introduce independent judicial safeguards.
3. **End formal and informal pressure on media organisations** and independently investigate the removal of journalists from their positions, including Munizae Jahangir, Matiullah Jan, and Kashif Abbasi; and **withdraw the Foreign Media facilitation Guidelines 2026**.
4. **Reform PEMRA** so that fines, suspensions, content restrictions and employment-related directives are transparent, proportionate and subject to prompt judicial review.
5. **Release Imaan Mazari-Hazir and Hadi Ali Chattha pending appeal**, and ensure the immediate, independent and fair determination of their appeals and sentence-suspension applications.
6. **Fully restore broadband and mobile internet** throughout Pakistan-administered Jammu and Kashmir, make all shutdown orders public and consistent with the principles of necessity and proportionality, including the prohibition of blanket or indefinite communications shutdowns.
7. **Conduct a transparent and participatory review** of all laws and practices restricting the right of freedom of expression and bring them into conformity with the ICCPR.

National security, public order and "false information" must not become open-ended justifications for criminalising dissent, controlling newsrooms or disconnecting entire populations. Pakistan's authorities must protect people, including journalists, lawyers, and human rights defenders, rather than punish them simply for their work.

Signed by,

1. *Amnesty International*
2. *Article 19*
3. *Bolo Bhi*
4. *Digital Rights Foundation (DRF)*
5. *Digital Rights Nepal (DRN)*
6. *Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP)*
7. *Internet Sans Frontières (Internet Without Borders)*
8. *KICTANet*
9. *Lawyers for Lawyers*
10. *Paradigm Initiative (PIN)*
11. *Tech Global Institute (TGI)*
12. *The Future of Free Speech*
13. *Women of Uganda Network (WOUGNET)*