

# Pakistan

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## INTRODUCTION

Since its independence in 1947, Pakistan has been facing several political, economic, and social crises, which have kept the country searching for stability and identity. Through its checkered history, the country has experienced diverse forms of governance, including parliamentary, presidential, military, and hybrid regimes. In 2025, Pakistani government officials take pride in admitting the hybrid nature of the political arrangement, with widespread allegations of electoral rigging in the February 2024 general elections by one of the largest parties in the country. Despite a decade-long political instability and polarization in the country, four different governments have been in agreement on curtailing media freedom in Pakistan since 2013.

For the last few decades, Pakistan has been one of the most dangerous countries for journalists. According to the 2024 World Press Freedom Index, Pakistan is ranked 152 out of 180 countries, highlighting a steady regression of press freedom. Violence against journalists is a trend in ascendance, with eight journalists killed in different parts of the country in 2024. Despite challenges, Pakistani journalists have traditionally resisted government controls and tried to develop a vibrant media landscape. However, government-controlled media regulators and the federal and provincial government ministries introduce vaguely worded laws, such as the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, to suppress dissent and jeopardize journalistic integrity.

Our team launched the fieldwork for this study in the middle of 2023 after the country had survived the COVID pandemic, but it was passing through a turbulent political phase. Former prime minister Imran Khan's popular political party was posing a serious threat to the interim government responsible for reviving a fragile economy amid rising political turmoil, coupled with mounting terrorism in the Western provinces. Consequently, the data collection process for this study slowed down. The country returned to relative economic and political normalcy by the end of 2024, which galvanized our fieldwork in all corners of the country.

## BACKGROUNDS OF JOURNALISTS

The selected sample of Pakistani journalists reflected a relatively representative gender distribution, with 28% female and 72% male journalists. Pakistan claims a youth bulge with 64% of the population between 29 and 35 years old, which is evident in our data showing that the average age of the journalists is 35.7 years (SD = 11.1; Median = 35). The education levels are impressive, as 32% of the sample has a bachelor's degree, 57% a master's degree, and 6.1% hold a doctorate. Additionally, 68% of the sample had received formal education or professional training in journalism from different institutions. Most journalists (81.9%) obtained this training from a university or college, 70% received training through apprenticeship/cadetship, and 73% were trained through short-term courses.

## JOURNALISTS IN THE NEWSROOM

As print media journalism is declining in Pakistan since the emergence of private TV channels in the early 2000s, our data indicate that 31% journalists worked for organizations in the print media industry, including newspapers (17%), magazines (3%), and news agencies (11%). In our sample, 42% of journalists worked for organizations with a background in TV, and 3% did radio journalism. As the rising trends indicate, 15% of the sampled journalists worked for native online media, 3.2% belonged to the telecommunication sector, and 7% said they had no main employer. Regarding the reach of primary medium, 75% of the journalists reported working for (trans)national media, whereas 25.0% primarily catered to local or regional media.

Private/commercial media employed an overwhelming majority of journalists (86%), while 5% worked for public service media owned by the state. As many as 6% of journalists worked for community media, and 3% found their career in non-profit media. Regarding the current working situation, 57% of journalists had permanent full-time contracts, and 74% were members of a journalists' union. Most journalists (71%) worked on multiple beats instead of a specific area/beat. With 10.9 years of professional experience (SD = 8.2; Median = 10), 77% sampled journalists were not involved in a managerial role. A minority (3%) worked in top management, while 20% of journalists had middle management roles due to ownership structures in private and public sector media organizations.

Regarding the current working and employment situation, 8% of journalists had part-time permanent contracts, 9% had full-time fixed-term contracts, 3% had part-time fixed-term contracts, and 16% worked as freelancers or self-employed. As stated earlier, most journalists served the profession on full-time permanent contracts. The descriptive results indicate that almost half of the journalistic community lacks job security, and 36% of journalists reported resorting to other earning means, including additional jobs, especially in academia. Pakistani journalists worked for 44.6 hours a week (SD = 14.7; Median = 48; for those in full-time employment), and approximately a quarter of sampled journalists reported feeling stressed often (14%) and very often (8%).

## SAFETY AND WORK-RELATED CONCERNS

We received split answers in response to questions related to safety and work-related concerns. Although a majority of journalists dismissed a widely held notion that journalists are under threat in Pakistan, concerns about journalists' safety and job security are real. The Pakistani journalism landscape is challenging for journalists, with a restrictive environment coinciding with physical violence and threats from various government departments and terrorist groups. Pakistani journalists faced a variety of verbal attacks, including demeaning or hateful speech, public discrediting of journalists' work, surveillance, hacking, or blocking, questioning of personal morality, and workplace bullying. These were among the most prevalent safety threats (see Table 1). A few journalists reported receiving threats very often, but their concerns cannot be ignored. The most worrying threats are physical violence, intimidation that targets family, and abductions by government agencies or criminals/terrorists. This precarious situation raises concerns among journalists regarding their job security as well. Several non-governmental organizations have denounced this threatening environment and urged the government to boost journalists' safety. Nevertheless, the climate for journalists is dangerous despite these measures, which indicates a larger trend of a diminishing media space in the face of continuous political and social unrest.

**TABLE 1. EXPERIENCED THREATS**

	N	Very often	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Demeaning or hateful speech directed at you	363	4.7%	11.8%	37.2%	19.8%	26.4%
Public discrediting of your work	363	5.8%	12.4%	28.9%	26.2%	26.7%
Surveillance	363	5.8%	13.5%	33.3%	24.2%	23.1%
Hacking or blocking of social media accounts or websites	363	4.4%	11.0%	23.7%	24.5%	36.4%
Arrests, detentions or imprisonment	363	4.7%	3.9%	13.5%	13.8%	64.2%
Legal actions against you because of your work	363	3.0%	6.6%	16.0%	14.9%	59.5%
Stalking	363	5.5%	7.4%	22.9%	23.1%	41.0%
Other threats or intimidations directed at you	363	5.8%	6.9%	25.1%	20.9%	41.3%
Sexual assault or sexual harassment	363	3.3%	5.8%	14.9%	10.2%	65.8%
Other physical attacks	363	2.2%	6.6%	17.4%	19.3%	54.5%
Coercion	363	2.8%	6.6%	16.0%	20.9%	53.7%
Questioning of your personal morality	363	6.1%	12.1%	21.2%	23.4%	37.2%
Others using your byline for fabricated or manipulated stories	363	4.7%	10.7%	24.5%	24.0%	36.1%
Others disseminating your personal information	363	4.4%	8.5%	22.0%	29.2%	35.8%
Workplace bullying	363	6.1%	9.9%	25.9%	18.7%	39.4%
Abductions	363	3.0%	6.6%	12.4%	16.0%	62.0%
Office raids or seizures or damage to equipment	363	1.9%	5.5%	13.2%	17.9%	61.4%
Intimidation that targets family	363	2.5%	5.0%	14.6%	16.8%	61.2%

Question: "In the last five years, how often have you experienced any of the following actions related to your work as a journalist?"

## JOURNALISTIC ROLES

Pakistani journalists seemed inclined to play a responsible role in society by shedding light on societal problems (72%), promoting peace and tolerance (82%), educating the audience (87%), supporting national development (75%), and supporting efforts to protect public health (79%). The focus of Pakistani journalists is on promoting societal development, while political roles are given less consideration. Overall, the sampled journalists preferred working under the social responsibility framework.

**TABLE 2. JOURNALISTIC ROLES**

	N	Very/extremely important	Mean	SD
Be a detached observer	362	53.6%	3.33	1.17
Monitor and scrutinize those in power	361	51.2%	3.33	1.18
Shine a light on society's problems	361	71.7%	3.89	1.07
Motivate people to participate in politics	360	33.1%	2.78	1.32
Provide analysis of current affairs	361	63.2%	3.59	1.09
Let people express their views	360	70.6%	3.85	1.09
Provide information people need to form political opinion	363	58.4%	3.46	1.15
Advocate for social change	363	66.4%	3.76	1.13
Influence public opinion	363	57.3%	3.48	1.15
Set the political agenda	363	29.2%	2.61	1.31
Promote peace and tolerance	363	81.8%	4.25	1.01
Educate the audience	363	87.3%	4.34	0.90
Point toward possible solutions to society's problems	363	70.8%	3.83	1.05
Speak on behalf of the marginalized	363	59.0%	3.62	1.15
Support national development	362	74.9%	4.01	1.00
Support government policy	363	34.2%	2.89	1.26
Convey a positive image of political leaders	363	27.3%	2.54	1.31
Provide entertainment and relaxation	363	48.5%	3.34	1.15
Provide the kind of news that attracts the largest audience	363	66.4%	3.76	1.10
Provide advice, orientation and direction for daily life	363	53.7%	3.47	1.14
Tell stories that emotionally move the audience	363	48.8%	3.25	1.17
Support efforts to protect public health	363	78.8%	4.04	1.01
Counteract disinformation	362	71.3%	3.90	1.19
Discuss future implications of current events	363	62.5%	3.69	1.02

Question: "Please tell me how important it is to do each of the following in your daily work." (Scale: 5 = Extremely important; 4 = Very important; 3 = Moderately important; 2 = Slightly important; 1 = Not at all important.)

### JOURNALISTIC EPISTEMOLOGIES

Pakistani journalists agreed that journalists should focus on facts and make their standpoint transparent. Approximately half of the sampled journalists strongly agreed with different items asking them about facts, truth, objectivity, and accuracy (see Table 3).

**TABLE 3. JOURNALISTIC EPISTEMOLOGIES**

	N	Agree/ strongly agree	Mean	SD
Interpretation is necessary to make sense of facts	363	52.6%	3.35	1.14
Truth is inevitably shaped by those in power	363	49.6%	3.33	1.12
It is impossible for journalists to withhold their personal beliefs from reporting	363	38.6%	3.07	1.10
Things are either true or false, there is no in-between	363	44.1%	3.25	1.10
It is possible to represent objective reality in reporting	363	52.6%	3.42	0.96
Journalists should trust their instincts in deciding what's true and what's not	363	40.2%	3.13	1.08
Journalists should intuitively know what the final story will be	362	49.2%	3.24	1.05
Journalists should let the facts speak for themselves	362	60.5%	3.58	1.05
Journalists should be part of a community to portray it accurately	363	52.9%	3.44	1.11
Journalists should make their standpoint transparent in their work	362	64.6%	3.69	1.06
Journalists should alert audiences when a source's claim is untruthful	363	60.6%	3.63	1.03

Questions: "The following statements deal with beliefs related to how journalists know what they know. For each of them, please tell me how strongly you agree or disagree." / "Using the same scale, please tell me how strongly you agree or disagree with the following beliefs." (Scale: 5 = Strongly agree; 4 = Agree; 3 = Neither agree nor disagree; 2 = Disagree; 1 = Strongly disagree.)

### JOURNALISTIC ETHICS

A significant majority of the journalists strongly agreed with the notion that professional standards should run supreme. Pakistani journalists consider personal judgment less important than professional standards, supporting the idea of objectivity (see Table 4). They, however, strongly agree that specific situations or extraordinary circumstances might allow them to disregard professional standards. Besides, they also believe in certain less ethical practices, such as using hidden recording devices (56%) and paying for confidential information (51%), if warranted by circumstances (see Table 5). According to Pakistani journalists, controversial reporting methods could be justified on occasions.

**TABLE 4. ETHICAL ORIENTATIONS**

	N	Agree/ strongly agree	Mean	SD
What is ethical for journalists should always be determined by professional standards regardless of situation and personal judgment	363	67.8%	3.76	1.19
What is ethical for journalists should be determined by professional standards unless extraordinary circumstances require disregarding them	362	54.1%	3.41	1.01
What is ethical for journalists should depend on each specific situation	363	50.7%	3.27	1.08
What is ethical for journalists should be a matter of personal judgment	363	32.5%	2.76	1.17

Question: "The following statements describe different responses journalists may have to ethical problems. For each of them, please tell me how strongly you agree or disagree." (Scale: 5 = Strongly agree; 4 = Agree; 3 = Neither agree nor disagree; 2 = Disagree; 1 = Strongly disagree.)

**TABLE 5. JUSTIFICATION OF CONTROVERSIAL REPORTING METHODS**

	N	Always justified	Justified on occasion
Claiming to be somebody else	362	12.2%	45.0%
Using hidden recording devices	363	11.0%	56.2%
Using confidential business or government documents without authorization	363	14.0%	41.3%
Using the personal materials of powerful people, such as documents and photos, without their permission	363	11.3%	38.8%
Using the personal materials of ordinary people, such as documents and photos, without their permission	363	11.6%	30.6%
Paying people for confidential information	363	11.8%	51.2%
Accepting money from sources	363	9.6%	24.0%
Accepting a free product or service from sources	363	11.0%	33.3%
Producing content that mimics news stories but hides its promotional nature	363	11.0%	43.3%
Publishing or broadcasting stories with information that is not yet verified	363	11.0%	26.2%

Question: "Which of the following, if any, do you think may be always justified, or justified on occasion, and which would you not approve of under any circumstances?"

### EDITORIAL AUTONOMY AND MEDIA FREEDOM

Almost a quarter of Pakistani journalists believed they had complete freedom in selecting and emphasizing an aspect of a story they were working on. Only 16% believed there is press freedom in Pakistan, which is in accordance with the data reported on previous pages. Journalists deal with several internal and external pressures, and they have to navigate a precarious balance while working on their assignments.

**TABLE 6. PERCEPTIONS OF EDITORIAL AUTONOMY AND MEDIA FREEDOM**

	N	A great deal/ complete freedom	Mean	SD
Freedom in selecting the news stories	361	25.5%	2.86	1.11
Freedom in deciding which aspects of a story should be emphasized	363	24.8%	2.88	1.08
Media freedom in Pakistan	360	16.1%	2.48	1.12

(Scale: 5 = Complete freedom; 4 = A great deal of freedom; 3 = Some freedom; 2 = Little freedom; 1 = No freedom at all.)

## EDITORIAL INFLUENCES

Pakistani journalists considered higher editors, news organization owners, editorial policy, journalism ethics, media laws and regulations, access to information, and government censorship as the key factors that determine news production (see Table 8). These internal and external factors/pressures expressively influence the work environment in the newsroom. The military is another institution that exercises significant control/influence over news production and reporting.

**TABLE 7. EDITORIAL INFLUENCES**

	N	Very/extremely influential	Mean	SD
Peers on the news staff	352	27.0%	2.69	1.21
Editorial supervisors and higher editors	349	40.1%	3.08	1.22
The business managers of the news organization	348	38.2%	3.02	1.28
The owners of the news organization	344	44.5%	3.22	1.35
Editorial policy	352	41.5%	3.13	1.27
Advertising considerations	348	35.3%	2.98	1.26
Profit expectations	342	32.5%	2.81	1.34
Audience research and data	348	36.2%	3.01	1.21
Availability of news-gathering resources	352	38.4%	3.05	1.24
Time limits	349	40.4%	3.13	1.21
Journalism ethics	359	47.6%	3.31	1.21
Self-censorship	353	39.1%	3.11	1.24
Personal values and beliefs	351	43.3%	3.10	1.35
Colleagues in other media	351	21.9%	2.52	1.17
Friends, acquaintances and family	351	22.5%	2.48	1.19
Feedback from the audience	356	31.7%	2.89	1.21
Competing news organizations	352	27.3%	2.86	1.12
Media laws and regulation	357	41.5%	3.16	1.19
Access to information	354	43.2%	3.19	1.20
Government censorship	349	41.8%	3.20	1.24
Government officials	347	38.0%	3.05	1.23
Politicians	350	36.0%	2.93	1.29
Business people	343	30.0%	2.80	1.23
Public relations	350	29.1%	2.78	1.20
Relationships with news sources	346	30.9%	2.88	1.19
Police	348	22.1%	2.59	1.22
Issue advocacy groups	347	21.6%	2.48	1.18
Scientists or health experts	350	20.3%	2.84	1.20
Religious groups and institutions	347	30.6%	3.23	1.38
Military	338	45.5%	2.94	1.28
Para-military groups, militias and similar groups	337	33.7%	2.70	1.25
Organized crime and criminal groups	338	26.4%	2.72	1.35
Terrorist groups	340	29.6%	2.41	1.22

Question: "Here is a list of potential sources of influence. Please tell me how much influence each of the following has on your work as a journalist." (Scale: 5 = Extremely influential; 4 = Very influential; 3 = Moderately influential; 2 = Slightly influential; 1 = Not at all influential.)