

# Pakistan tightens media censorship

Two interviews of Opposition leaders were taken off air, another one was cancelled at the last minute

MEHMAL SARFRAZ  
LAHORE

In recent weeks, Pakistan has seen interviews of two high-profile Opposition leaders being taken off air, raising fears of growing censorship of media by the government.

After former President Asif Ali Zardari's interview went off air from Geo News earlier this month, an interview with Maryam Nawaz, leader of Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and daughter of former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, on Hum News met with the same fate last week.

Journalist Nadeem Malik, who interviewed Ms. Nawaz, tweeted that he "just came to know [that] @MaryamNSharif interview has been stopped forcefully just few minutes after it started Live". He telecast the interview on his Twitter and YouTube accounts.

In a press conference held earlier this month, Ms. Nawaz played a video of Judge Arshad Malik in which he is seen allegedly admitting that he was blackmailed into giving a verdict against former Prime Minister Sharif. TV channels showed her press conference live and were later sent notices by the regulatory authority PEMRA.

Also, Ms. Nawaz held a rally in Mandi Bahauddin in Punjab. Three channels that gave coverage to the rally were taken off air. It took almost a day of back-channel negotiations to restore them. The media has been directed not to give airtime to those under trial or those who have been convicted.

"Don't know [how long the censorship will continue] but as a journalist, my job is to dig out facts and report, which I will continue to do. The Islamabad High Court's



**Not on air:** Microphones of Pakistani channels seen ahead of a press conference in Islamabad. Channels are being taken off air with little or no notice, complain journalists. •GETTY IMAGES

decision [to remove Judge Arshad Malik] also proves that it was the professional journalistic effort to highlight the issues relating to the videos transparently and justly," Nadeem Malik told *The Hindu*.

Senior journalist Najam Sethi was also planning to interview Ms. Nawaz, but it couldn't even be recorded. "Our Channel 24 HD was taken off air following instructions from unnamed government and state organs to cable operators across the country," Mr. Sethi told *The Hindu*.

## Palpable threat

The channel's management was told that 'excessive' coverage of Maryam Nawaz Sharif's rally would not be condoned, Mr. Sethi added.

The channel was restored after a few days following nationwide condemnation by media and political parties of bullying tactics. "However, when I subsequently scheduled an interview of Maryam Nawaz, Channel 24

**The ruling party has built a narrative that anyone who speaks against it is a traitor**

FEREHAH IDREES  
Journalist

management pulled it at the last minute. It seems there was a palpable threat that if the interview went ahead, the channel would be taken off air for a whole month."

Mr. Sethi believes that resistance is mounting. "Respected journalists are standing up and telling tales of personal repression. Some small channels are defying state censorship. Media bodies and political parties are raising concerns in public. If there is public agitation against the government's back-breaking economic policies, the media can peg its freedom to it and break its chains," said Mr. Sethi.

In recent days, intimidation and harassment of journalists have taken another form. "What happened at

my house is obviously to harass me, which is an old tactic," award-winning journalist Asma Shirazi told *The Hindu*, referring to two incidents of attempted break-in.

"It is not possible for us to stay silent and not voice our dissent. Our fight for freedom of expression and the truth will continue. Censorship is there and it is blatant. We are fighting a war against such censorship. We have a long history of fighting for media freedom. We will not give up," she added.

Journalist Munizae Jahangir said that in a democracy, the Opposition should be allowed to be heard; media should not be censored through vague laws or forced to self-censor; and civil society movements should not be maligned and/or banned as 'anti-state' movements. "National security cannot be about protecting vested interests of a powerful military but must instead protect vulnerable citizens of society. Pakistan is a resilient country with strong lawyers' bo-

dies, divided yet lively journalist unions, a fierce Opposition and citizens that have fought for their rights under harsher circumstances, so I am confident that at the very least there will be a ferocious fight for democratic values," Ms. Jahangir said.

## Gag order

Anchorperson Fereha Idrees believes that the notion that there is a gag order on media in Pakistan is now spreading.

"Sooner rather than later, it will come to haunt the government. If anyone has been the beneficiary of free media, it has been this government. During the *dharma* days, my present channel AbTakK faced a serious [closure] threat because of the then PML-N government's pressure, but we sustained the pressure to support the Opposition and their right to free speech. Sadly and ironically, ever since the PTI [Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf] has come into power, they have built a narrative that anyone who speaks against them is either paid or a traitor," she said.

She added that Pakistan is seeing a very active but directionless PEMRA (Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority), which is putting channels off air with little or no notice just because they are showing two sides of the story.

"The other day, a PTI spokesperson labelled me a criminal for glorifying Maryam Nawaz's speech because I was reading out her tweet. Such a level of intolerance is only reflective of a narrow vision. If the government wants us to tell a good story, they need to give us good stories instead of yelling at us for showing voice of dissent," Ms. Idrees said.

# 26 killed as gunmen from al-Shabaab storm Somalia hotel

Attack lasted 11 hours, foreign citizens among the victims

REUTERS  
MOGADISHU

Islamist gunmen killed at least 26 people, including Kenyans, Americans, a Briton and Tanzanians, when they stormed a hotel in Somalia's southern port city of Kismayo, a regional State President said on Saturday, the deadliest day in the city since insurgents were driven out in 2012.

A car bomb exploded at the hotel where local elders and lawmakers were having a meeting on Friday night, and then three gunmen stormed in, police said. It took 11 hours before security forces ended the overnight attack, police officer Major Mohamed Abdi said.

The dead included a presidential candidate for August's regional elections, Jubbaland State President Ahmed Mohamed Madobe said. At least two journalists and a UN agency staff member were also reported to



**Militancy returns:** The Medina hotel in Kismayo, Somalia, which was targeted by al-Shabaab on Friday night. •AFP

have been killed. Al-Qaeda-linked Islamist group al-Shabaab, which is trying to topple Somalia's UN-backed government, immediately claimed responsibility for the attack. Abdiasis Abu Musab, the group's military operations spokesman said on Saturday that they had killed 30 people and four of its fighters were also dead. Mr. Madobe said three Ken-

nyans, one Briton, two Americans and three Tanzanians were among those killed.

"Four militants attacked the hotel. One of them was the suicide car bomber, two were shot dead and one was captured alive by security forces," he said. He said 56 people were wounded in the attack, including two Chinese citizens.

# Willing to release tanker if Iran gives guarantee on destination, says U.K.

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE  
LONDON

British Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt sought to ease tensions with Iran on Saturday, saying that a tanker held by Gibraltar would be released if Tehran guaranteed that it was not heading to Syria.

He said he had a "constructive call" with his Iranian counterpart Mohammad Javad Zarif, who he said assured him that Tehran "is not seeking to escalate" tensions between the countries.

"I reassured him our concern was destination not origin of the oil on *Grace One*," a tanker seized off the coast of the tiny British territory of Gibraltar on July 4, Mr. Hunt tweeted. U.S. officials believed the tanker was destined for Syria to deliver oil, in violation of separate sets of EU and U.S. sanctions.

Mr. Hunt said Britain "would facilitate release if we received guarantees that it would not be going to Syria, following due process in Gib (Gibraltar) courts. "Was

told by FM Zarif that Iran wants to resolve issue and is not seeking to escalate." Tehran had reacted angrily to the seizure, and Britain this week said Iranian military vessels had tried to "impede the passage" of a British oil tanker in the Strait of Hormuz. Mr. Hunt also said that he raised with Mr. Zarif the imprisonment of British-Iranian national Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, and added that Mr. Zarif "said he would continue to seek to find a solution".

## ELSEWHERE



### Ranil to appear before Easter attacks panel

COLOMBO  
Sri Lankan Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe said that he would appear before the Parliamentary Select Committee probing the Easter Sunday attacks that claimed 258 lives and would provide all available information, according to a media report. PTI

### Channel set to air Putin documentary targeted

KIEV  
A grenade launcher fired at the building of a Ukrainian television channel on Saturday after it announced plans to air a controversial documentary featuring Russian President Vladimir Putin. The attack at around 3.40 a.m., described as terrorism by officials, caused no injuries, police said. AFP

# U.K. police's warning to media provokes outrage

Outlets told not to publish leaked papers

REUTERS  
LONDON

Senior British politicians, including the contenders to be the next Prime Minister, joined journalists on Saturday in criticising police for warning media not to publish leaked government documents, saying it was a "dangerous road to tread".

Last week, a Sunday newspaper published leaked memos from Britain's Washington Ambassador that provoked a serious diplomatic spat with U.S. President Donald Trump and ultimately led to the envoy announcing his resignation.

Britain's most senior counterterrorism officer, Neil Basu, said on Friday that police would investigate who was responsible but also warned journalists and publishers they too could be in breach of the law if further documents

were leaked. His comments provoked anger and criticism from journalists, editors and politicians who said it risked infringing the freedom of the press. "The state threatening media freedom is a dangerous road to tread," Health Minister Matt Hancock tweeted.

## 'Ill-advised statement'

George Osborne, editor of the *London Evening Standard* and a former Finance Minister, described the remarks as a "very stupid and ill-advised statement from a junior officer who doesn't appear to understand much about press freedom".

Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt and his predecessor Boris Johnson, both in the race to replace Theresa May as Prime Minister, said the leaker should be found but the press should not be targeted.

# Rallying against Beijing



**Hong Kong erupts:** Hong Kong protesters rallying on Saturday in Sheung Shui, a town near the boundary with mainland China, where thousands marched against the presence of Chinese traders, seizing on another grievance following major unrest over an extradition Bill. The demonstration began peacefully but devolved into skirmishes and shouting. •AP

# Turkey ignores U.S. warnings over S-400

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE  
ANKARA

Turkey ignored U.S. warnings as it continued on Saturday to take delivery of Russia's S-400 missile defence system near Ankara, a Defence Ministry statement indicated.

"Delivery of S-400 Long Range Air and Missile Defence Systems resumed today," the statement said. "The fourth Russian plane carrying S-400 parts landed at Murted Airport outside Ankara," it added.

The U.S. fears that if Ankara integrates the S-400 into its defences, data about the U.S.-built F-35 fighter jet could leak back to the Russians, and Washington has threatened to deny Turkey access to the stealth aircraft.

NATO is also "concerned about the potential consequences" of the S-400 purchase, said an official.

# New Zealanders begin handing over firearms

Christchurch attacks led to tighter laws

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE  
CHRISTCHURCH

Dozens of New Zealanders handed in their firearms on Saturday as a gun buyback scheme went into operation aimed at ridding the country of semi-automatic weapons in the wake of the Christchurch attacks.

The first of more than 250 collections to be held nationwide was held in Christchurch where 51 Muslim worshippers were gunned down while at prayer less than four months ago.

The government, with support from Opposition parties, immediately rushed through legislation to tighten New Zealand's gun laws.

With armed police monitoring the handover, 68 firearms owners handed in 97 weapons and 94 parts and



A New Zealand policeman in Upper Hutt, near Wellington. •AFP

accessories in the first two hours. The regional police commander Mike Johnson said that 903 gun owners in the Canterbury area had registered 1,415 firearms to be handed in.

# China's independent journalists struggle to be heard

Crackdown under President Xi has left the press entirely devoid of critical reporting, with many topics being off limits

JAVIER C. HERNÁNDEZ  
BEIJING

She was once one of China's best journalists, roaming the country uncovering stories about police brutality, wrongful convictions and environmental disasters. But these days, Zhang Wenmin struggles to be heard.

The police intimidate Ms. Zhang's sources. The authorities shut down her social media accounts. Unable to find news outlets that will publish her work, she lives largely off her savings. "The space for free speech has become so limited," Ms. Zhang, 45, said. "It's now dangerous to say you are an independent journalist."

## Voices silenced

China's investigative reporters once provided rare voices of accountability and criti-

cism in a society tightly controlled by the ruling Communist Party, exposing scandals about babies sickened by tainted formula and blood-selling schemes backed by the government.

But under President Xi Jinping, such journalists have all but disappeared, as the authorities have harassed and imprisoned dozens of reporters and as news outlets have cut back on in-depth reporting. One of the most glaring consequences of Mr. Xi's revival of strongman politics is that the Chinese press is now almost entirely devoid of critical reporting. Critics call it the "total censorship era."

"We're almost extinct," said Liu Hu, a reporter from Sichuan who was detained for nearly a year after investigating corrupt politicians.



**Alone and helpless:** Zhang Wenmin, who has written stories on police brutality and environmental disasters. •NYT

"No one is left to reveal the truth."

Since rising to power in 2012, Mr. Xi has transformed China's media landscape, restoring the primacy of party-controlled news outlets while silencing independent voices. He has said that the mission of the news media should be to spread "positive energy" and to "love the party,

protect the party and serve the party." Mr. Xi's crackdown on journalists has left China in what sometimes seems like an information vacuum.

A rapidly expanding list of topics is off limits to all but the party's main official media outlets, among them the trade war with the U.S., the #MeToo movement, gene-

edited babies and the spread of African swine fever.

## Online outlets targeted

Mr. Xi's campaign has also targeted online outlets, with the government ordering many to close or shift away from critical reporting. Q Daily, a news-site founded in 2014, was known for running feature stories on social issues, including problems facing rural migrants in big cities. But the authorities have repeatedly shut down the site over the past year. The government has accused it of illegally "conducting original reporting" and harming public opinion.

Before Mr. Xi took control, Chinese journalism had entered something of a golden age, with reporters publishing investigations about faulty vaccines and shoddy

buildings toppled by earthquakes. But under Mr. Xi's rule, harassment of journalists has worsened. At least 48 journalists were in prison in China as of December, more than in any other country, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists.

Despite the political climate, a small group of investigative journalists are fighting to keep their profession alive, publishing stories on social media and overseas outlets. Mr. Liu continues to investigate serial killers and problems in the justice system, often under a pen name. The best journalists are persistent and aware of the risks of the job, he said. "Outside of China, journalists are fired for writing false reports," he said. "Inside China, they are fired for telling the truth." NY TIMES