

PAKISTAN:

Vibrant Media, Living with Threats

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By [Madiha R. Tahir](#)

Prologue: Khan Khel's Story

Musa Khan Khel turned 28 on February 4, 2009. On February 18, his throat was slit and he was shot dead. There were 32 bullets in his hands, his feet, his head, and it was all these things together that killed him. And this too perhaps: He was a journalist. He worked for Pakistan's Geo TV and *The News*.

Khan Khel was the second journalist killed in the last four months in Swat, a scenic valley in the troubled northwestern region of Pakistan. The previous victim, Qari Shoaib, who worked for *Daily Azadi*, was shot dead by security personnel who mistook him for the wrong kind of local in his hometown, Mingora.

Khan Khel knew someone was after him. "I have been receiving death threats from a powerful force. They are after me. They want to kill me," he reportedly told his employers. 'They' could have been the local Taliban. 'They' could have also been one of the arms of the Pakistani state – the military, or perhaps Pakistan's secretive spy agency, the ISI. It's unknown, and, most likely, will remain so.

Khan Khel set out on the morning of his death to report with his brother. They were banned from covering senior minister Bashir Bilour's press conference that day announcing the Swat deal between the government and local militants. Khan Khel stated this fact in the last report he filed. It would run in *The News* a day after his death.

There was other major news as well: He covered a peace march in Swat that morning. It was led by an old outlaw. Sufi Mohammad and his organization, Tehreek-e-Nafaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi (TNSM), led thousands of Swatis in a peace march after he brokered a deal with Pakistan's government for the enforcement of *Nizam-e-adi*, a local permutation of Islamic law, in Swat in return for peace. The militant, who was jailed six years for dispatching volunteers to fight the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, has also promised that he will negotiate a ceasefire with the obdurate, ironfisted leader of the local Taliban, his son-in-law, Maulana Fazlullah. The aging outlaw has been refashioned a peace activist.

Khan Khel was picked up by gunmen at the rally. His body was found a few hours later near the town of Matta in the Swat valley.

The Roots of Pakistani Media

The history of the Pakistan press pre-dates Pakistan. It's a fiercely political history. "In Pakistan, people go into journalism because they're passionate about politics," says U.S.-based *Dawn* correspondent Anwar Iqbal. "They're very clear about that."

It's the result of a past rooted in repressive British colonial rule. That inadvertently gave rise to a stubborn press.

Pre-Partition. The newspaper was born as a complaint. The earliest printed Indian newspaper in 1780 attacked the Governor-General of the East India Company, Warren Hastings, his wife and other members of the European colonial-settler community in India. Bureaucrats moved to suppress the paper, only to see others crop up in its place. By 1857—the year of the Sepoy Rebellion against the British—newspapers in a variety of languages largely catering to the Anglicized Indian class were available.

They helped produce a collective sensibility among Indians, and consequently, were distrusted by the British. The ruthless suppression of the rebellion followed a ban on several journals. By 1910, the British government had passed the crushing Press Act that levied heavy fees on newspapers and incarcerated editors for publishing what it called "[prohibited matter](#)"—in broad terms—anything that could be construed to question British rule.

Still, by 1947, when India was partitioned from its new neighbor, Pakistan, there were 51 dailies and 258 weeklies in English alone.

Post-Partition. Four days before Partition, Pakistan's founder Mohammad Ali Jinnah delivered a speech that angered some members of the Constituent Assembly. Jinnah expressed his hopes for a secular Pakistan where Muslims would constitute a numerical and cultural majority, but the state would retain a secular relationship with its citizens.

The first of the "press advices," a practice that would have a long history in Pakistan, followed. *Dawn*, the oldest English-language newspaper founded by Jinnah, which was to publish [the](#)

[speech](#), was “advised” to delete certain sections, writes noted press critic Zamir Niazi in his work *The Press in Chains*. To date, it is unclear who initially issued the order.

What is clear is that from the moment of Pakistan’s founding, its influential classes recognized the enormous significance of the press in laying the groundwork for the young nation. Many among them had no qualms about continuing the heavy-handed tactics they had inherited from the British.

That legacy was still in evidence decades later in 2007, when General Pervez Musharraf ordered a government raid of GeoTV during its broadcast of a rally supporting the Chief Justice that the general had sacked unconstitutionally. As the showdown between the government and lawyers movement demanding the reinstatement of the deposed judiciary sizzled, Musharraf imposed new restrictions on the press.

Finally, on November 3, Musharraf imposed emergency rule in Pakistan blaming the judiciary and the media for the unrest. The rule included a shut down of all private television channels.

The media did not give up, however. GeoTV and ARY One World transmitted their broadcasts via satellite from Dubai. Geo, ARY and Aaj TV all uploaded important content onto YouTube and other Web sites. Musharraf’s less than successful ban ran for several months, before most channels were allowed to resume broadcasting.

The Press Today

“When I look back,” says Iqbal, “I can’t recognize how much the media has changed.” Iqbal worked at *Dawn* for eight years before moving in the 1980s to the Urdu-language daily, *The Muslim*, as well as *United Press International*.

In those days of General Zia-ul-Haq’s regime, says Iqbal, government censors “would go to each and every page and take out what they didn’t like, every day.” Papers like *The Muslim* resisted. “Whenever something was censored,” explains Iqbal, “we’d draw scissors, and they said ‘you can’t do that,’ so we’d publish a blank space and they said ‘you can’t do that’ so we’d publish a story that made no sense, so on the front page, you’d have a story about flies.”

Restrictions relaxed considerably after the 1999 coup that brought Musharraf to power. He gave more latitude to newspapers to publish as they wished, and in March 2002, private cable and

satellite television channels were legalized for the first time. Roughly 57 private television channels now exist in Pakistan. Subscribers increased from 1.5 million in July 2004 to 3.27 million in July 2007, meaning that one-third of all Pakistanis had access to private news channels, according to Huma Yusuf at the Center for Future Civic Media.

The largest press conglomerates, The Dawn Group and The Jang Group, are among those who opened private television channels. The Dawn Group, which owns the oldest English-language paper of Pakistan, also runs an English-language television news station of the same name, as well as radio. The Jang Group owns the Urdu-daily *Jang*, the English daily *The News* as well as the largest private channel in Pakistan, GeoTV.

Jang publishes 1.2 million copies per day. “*Dawn* is nothing compared to that,” says Iqbal, “but somehow, because it’s English language, it’s influential.” Other papers that compete with these two leaders include the Lahore-based *Daily Times* and *Nawa-e-Waqt*.

Pakistan also has local papers in a multitude of languages. In some cases, as with *Mashriq*, based out of Peshawar, and *The Frontier Post*, also based out of Peshawar and Quetta, much of the reporting is borrowed from newswires, including the *Associated Press of Pakistan* (APP). But, original reportage can also be found. Reporters for the local *Daily Azadi* in the tumultuous North Western Frontier Province (NWFP) brave threats and an uncertain situation to provide original reporting.

The media, says journalist and author Ahmed Rashid, has “matured and expanded incredibly... Satellite TV is much more prevalent.” But this can also pose problems. “On the other hand, you have a lot of amateurism and polarization, the mixing up of factual reporting and analysis.”

Washington Post correspondent Imtiaz Ali concurs. “There’s competition among the TV channels for breaking news. Sometimes, journalists get very tough instructions from their managers to get the breaking news.”

The pressure, says Ali, who is at Yale this year on a journalism fellowship, sometimes means that reporters don’t fact-check their stories. The competition is not all bad. Because of it, the media “is very, very vibrant. It’s extremely critical and aggressively independent.”

That can have costs. Pakistan was cited as the most dangerous place in the world for journalists by the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists in 2008. It has the second highest death-

toll for journalists, after Iraq, says Reporters without Borders, a Paris-based press freedom group. Seven reporters were killed in Pakistan last year.

While international press watchdog groups speak largely about the Taliban as a danger to the press, Pakistani journalists often focus on the government's clampdown on journalists. BBC's Urdu World Service correspondent Hassan Mujtaba, who has written on human rights issues and homosexuality in Pakistan, says there are definitely taboo subjects that the media cannot touch. "You can't write about the ISI [Pakistan's spy agency] or the persecution of religious minorities. You can't say you're an atheist, you're gay, you're a dissident." Mujtaba went into exile from Pakistan in 1999.

Ethnic divisions within the press also have ramifications for individual reporters. The mainstream press is owned in large part by ethnic Punjabis. The vernacular and non-Punjabi press is under deep pressure, explains Mujtaba, who is ethnically Sindhi. The outcome for reporters of some ethnic groups that are already at war with the Pakistani state can sometimes be more brutal than for their Punjabi counterparts: An owner of a Baluchi television station in the province of Baluchistan was kidnapped and disappeared for close to a year. Two local reporters from NWFP were also killed last year.

How the Press Covered the Swat Deal

In a surprise move, the government of Pakistan signed a peace deal with a militant group based in the Swat valley this February. The pact will establish a local form of shari'a, or Islamic law, in a region that voted heavily in favor of the secular Awami National Party (ANP) in the last elections. Militants, based in the valley that was once a famous tourist destination, have been at war with the Pakistani military for control of the area.

The government says that the deal, which also calls for a ceasefire, is a path towards a more stable, lasting peace in Swat. But, critics contend that the government has effectively ceded Swat to militant groups. They say that it's naïve at best to trust Sufi Muhammad, the key signatory to the deal and the leader of the extremist Tehreek-e-Nafaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi (TNSM). Muhammad was jailed for several years for raising volunteers to go to Afghanistan to fight against the U.S. Now, in exchange for shari'a, he has promised that he will persuade Maulana Fazlullah, his son-in-law and a key leader of the local Pakistani Taliban, to lay down the Taliban's arms.

Complicating all this is the history of Swat itself. Until 1969, when it became part of Pakistan, Swat was an autonomously ruled princely state. Swatis often wax nostalgic about a time period when justice was speedy and inexpensive in local courts. The legal system then was a local form of shari'a. That changed after Swat came under Pakistan's rule.

The new court system is corrupt and inefficient, and Swat residents often must travel great distances outside their region for higher courts. That is why some Swatis who are the primary victims of the militancy and who associate shari'a with an expedient court system have supported the deal, a key provision of which is the establishment of higher courts within Swat.

These positions are staked and fought out vigorously in the press. "The media is very polarized," says Rashid. "You have the right-wing English media in favor of the deal. You have the so-called West against global terrorism being extremely upset with this deal."

A day after the deal was announced, Awami National Party's (ANP) Afrasayyab Khattak explained the party's position on Live w/ Talat. The involvement of the ANP, a secular party that swept the elections in the area last May, has many wondering about the fate of Swat. "We're not competing with the TNSM. Both of us are working towards peace. Some of it they will handle and some of it, we will," said Khattak.

The show also included Aaj TV's Swat Bureau Chief, Fayaz Zafar, who pointed out the local desire for peace and the government's failure to establish the rule of law in Swat. Finally, Human Rights Commission of Pakistan's (HRCP) Iqbal Haider questioned whether the writ of the state could be established through such compromise politics. Host Talat Hussain moved the show to Mingora inside Swat for three days speaking with local residents, as well as political and civil society figures.

Bolta Pakistan, a political news show akin to Crossfire, and Capital Talk hosted by journalist Hamid Mir, carried similar themes touching on questions of peace, rule of law in Swat, and the writ of the state.

These shows offered a detailed and textured look at the Swat deal, in stark contrast with U.S. media coverage of the issue. American news regularly fails to mention the issue of the government's institutional failure, or the desperation among Swatis who are the primary victims of extremist violence – even though these are the driving forces that led to the deal. "Their [US] aim is to get rid of al-Qaeda. It's different for us," says Iqbal. He paraphrases an ANP politician

“who said ‘my land and my people come first. It’s one simple act. I see people being killed every single day....’ This angle is missing here,” says Iqbal of the U.S. coverage. “No one wants to talk about it.”

The American media tends to write about Pakistan as a cast of suspicious characters: the bearded Taliban, the hapless government, the intransigent, money-hungry Pakistani military. Journalists repeatedly turn to a handful of well-titled experts to pronounce on the relationships among these characters, and that more or less constitutes ‘Pakistan’ in the American press.

Jane Perlez’s story on Swat, [Pakistan Makes a Taliban Truce Creating a Haven](#), frames the issue in terms of “Islamic law”—an ambiguous term without context. The story describes the creation of a Taliban sanctuary and a rebuff of “American demands for the Pakistani civilian and military authorities to stick with the fight against the militants, not make deals with them.” There are no actual voices from Swat residents in the article. The *Washington Post*’s story on the agreement, [Islamic Law Instituted In Pakistan’s Swat Valley](#), is similar.

National Public Radio dispenses with Pakistani voices altogether in covering Swat. Its story [Pakistan Deal With Taliban Draws Criticism](#) only uses three analysts, all with connections to the U.S. government: a former CIA station chief in Pakistan, a Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) analyst who previously helped coordinate U.S. State Department policy on Pakistan, and a former director for South Asia on the National Security Council. The report also cites an unnamed Department of Defense official.

Because Pakistan appears in US media stories as a collection of characters fighting for control, the driving concern becomes fear that its nuclear weapons may fall into the wrong hands. In a February 17 MSNBC broadcast, Rachel Maddow showed her audience Swat on a map. “Just so you know, Swat is only about 100 miles from - what’s this? Oh, yes. That’s the capital of Pakistan. That’s Islamabad. And maybe this is a bad time to mention that Pakistan has nuclear weapons.”

These stories reduce Swat to a formulaic story between those ‘for’ or ‘against’ the deal. They fail to examine the complexity of the situation. It is not that Pakistani papers did not denounce the deal. The *Daily Times*, highlighting the suffering of Swat’s residents, [recalled](#) that the last time the ANP government wrote up an accord with the followers of Sufi Muhammad, the son-in-law and Taliban leader Fazlullah, did not abide by it.

On the eve of the talks, *Dawn*'s [editorial](#) uncategorically stated, "There is no percentage in talking to people who despise the values one holds dearest and are committed to inflicting death and destruction aimed at overthrowing the state of Pakistan." The editorial also pointed out that

General Musharraf did us no favours by playing a double-game: keeping the threat of militancy alive while claiming to tackle it. 'If it weren't for me,' he was telling the neocons in Washington, 'Pakistan would fall to the Taliban.' Nothing could be further from the truth. He was part of the problem, not the solution.

But, alongside these stories ran other pieces detailing the history of Swat and the current political deal. A *Jang* [piece](#) discusses prior agreements and explained that many Swat residents saw the deal as a path towards peace. Bolta Pakistan ran brief interviews with various Swat residents who'd lost their sons and other relatives to the violence in the region. Talat Hussain taped a live show at a Swat police station to highlight the frustration among Swat residents at the inaccessibility of legal procedures and institutions like police stations and courts.

After a confrontation with a police officer who was unable to give any clear help or directives to residents who had gathered there with their paperwork for assistance, Hussain tracked down a senior officer. After an exchange of not more than seconds, in which the Chief Police Officer accused the journalist of "politicizing" the situation, the officer escaped further questioning by leaving through a back door.

The deal also elicited a range of other reactions. The most interesting perhaps, is a [letter](#) directed to Maulana Fazlullah published in local *Daily Azadi* by Aaj TV Swat Bureau Chief, Fayaz Zafar. He deftly compares Fazlullah's rule to Baitullah Mehsud's, the leader of the Pakistani Taliban in order to ask for some laxity in the rules. He writes (translated from Urdu):

You placed a ban on female education and following your orders, people no longer allowed their girls to go to school. You're also a member of the Tehreek-e-Taliban of Pakistan. In Waziristan, Baitullah Mehsud in Waziristan nor Maulana Faqeer Mohammad in Bajaur have placed a ban on female education....I ask that you discuss with your group and reconsider.

He continues, "I am trying with a letter to deliver to you the voice of the people."

A more complex picture emerges with ramifications that have little to do with the fear of nuclear bombs in jihadi hands. Pakistanis nationally are concerned with the principle of the rule of law. What the Swat locals appear to want is not so much ‘shari’a’ but an end to bloodshed and access to speedy and inexpensive justice.

Washington Post correspondent Imtiaz Ali, who hails from the NWFP where Swat is located, says that, since the military began its offensive, there has been “no progress. People are suffering. They are desperate for peace, be it shari’a, be it fascism, be it democracy.”

A Free Press?

“It’s very, very sad. It was a very sad day for me here,” says Ali from his current home in New Haven. He’s referring to Khan Khel’s murder. “Believe me, I cried here. I wept because of Musa.”

The two worked together briefly in 2007 when Ali traveled to Swat with Khan Khel. He says he realized that Khan Khel was not on good terms with Pakistani officials and the military. Khan Khel was often banned from the military’s press conferences.

Ali explains that when it comes to the deaths of journalists, no one takes responsibility. “The Taliban proudly declare when they’ve done something,” but they haven’t claimed responsibility for the killings of local journalists. In fact, they came to offer condolences with Khan Khel’s family after his death.

Does Ali think they are lying? “I don’t think so, no. The Taliban are one party to the conflict. They do need the coverage. They would even ask me after an interview, ‘where is this going to be published?’”

A single journalist’s case has yet to be solved. Says Ali, “This mysterious unknown killer is very scary.”

Clearly, reporters carry out their work in fear in Pakistan. Yet the question of whether the press is free is a vexed one that requires definitions both what it means to be the ‘press’ and what it means to be ‘free.’

The ‘press,’ for instance, is more than a collection of reporters. It is both an institution and a discursive system of knowledge that functions in a multi-layered context, only one of which is legal freedoms; another is bodily harm. On those terrains, it is certainly hampered by legitimate fears.

But, being ‘free’ can also be construed to question whether the media takes a critical stance of the world around it. That concept is not really taken into account by nongovernmental groups that measure press freedom. Thus, while some Pakistani journalists argue that their press is “ethnocentric” and dominated by particular urban interests, those issues are not part of the measure. At the same time, saying that the Pakistani press is un-free glosses over nuances.

Pushing beyond the question, “do you have a free press?” to concrete discussions can reveal that reporters’ understanding of their own freedoms—and those of others—can vary from the expected norm. In an interview last May, I asked Talat Hussain, who also writes for *The Guardian*, his impressions of the American press and asked him to compare with the Pakistani press. He responded sharply. “What do you mean? Embedded journalists? In-bed journalists?”