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<http://www.rsf.org/pakistan-geo-tv-target-of-pakistan-spy-24-12-2014,47418.html>

Asia - Pakistan

Inter-Services Intelligence

Geo TV, target of Pakistan spy agency

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Reporters Without Borders is sounding the alarm over a resurgence of violent attacks on media belonging to the Jang-Geo group – attacks reflecting a slander and harassment campaign stage-managed by the ISI and run by its political allies.

Attacks on press freedom by a party in power and by political factions have been on the increase in 2014, even as violence committed by non-state actors has remained essentially at its previous level.

As Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf, the opposition party led by former cricket champion Imran Khan, has grown more powerful, the media have been increasingly targeted in confrontations directed a wing of the government or by various political factions. PTI, for its part, has become the third-ranking political force following its showing in the 2013 legislative elections.

Since Khan's party launched a protest movement last 14 August, more than a dozen attacks on journalists, media workers and contributors of *Geo News*, a television channel, and for the daily newspapers *Jang* and *The News* have taken place. The media organizations were deliberately targeted by PTI militants. Most of these incidents have been filmed and photographed.

Part of the responsibility lies with media owners, businessmen who prize their political alliances to the detriment of journalistic ethics. Neha Ansari, a former journalist for the *Express Tribune*, described the process in *Foreign Policy* magazine. According to her, since opponents of the ruling party began holding the August demonstrations, charging voting fraud in the 2013 elections, "The owners of Pakistani media powerhouses — namely *ARY News*, *the Express Media Group*, and *Dunya News* — received instructions from the military establishment to support the 'dissenting' leaders and their sit-ins."

This editorial interference prompted numerous cases of biased press coverage and self-censorship. Above all, these practices led to a revival of animosity against the media, regardless of their political orientation, by political partisans of all persuasions. Whether pro-government, in the opposition or aligned with the military, the media, have frequently paid a high price for their coverage – sometimes directed by their owners - of the country's political conflicts.

Recent attacks against journalists in Islamabad, the capital city, illustrate the trend. On 30 November, journalists and technicians from two television channels were attacked, with their satellite trucks damaged. A cameraman from *Dawn News* was injured by small explosives thrown by PTI members, while two technicians from *Dunya News* were wounded by a grenade and rushed to the hospital.

On 12 December in Karachi, **Mazhar Abbas**, a journalist and former secretary-general of the Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists, was brutally attacked along with a crew from the *Geo News* television channel by PTI militants. A *Geo News* reporter had to hide in a satellite truck to escape the attackers.

Geo News at centre of storm

Many media have been hit by intimidation and violence from political partisans. But in the case of *Geo TV*, constant harassment by intelligence agencies has spurred the attacks. The channel's star journalist and presenter, **Hamid Mir**, has openly accused ISI of being behind an attempt to kill him last April. Since then, *Geo TV* has been targeted by the spy service and all its allies.

This was the case in a suspension order by the Pakistan Media Regulatory Authority last June. In

addition, **Mir Shakeel-ur-Rehman**, the channel's owner, and entertainment journalist **Shaista Lodhi** of the "Utho Jago Pakistan" programme, were sentenced on 26 November to 26 years in prison by a court in the autonomous northern region of Gilgit Baltistan, for having broadcast a supposedly "blasphemous" programme. These moves bear the trademark of the ISI: the initial legal complaint, filed last 26 May, came from Himayatullah Khan, leader of the radical religious group Ahl-e-Sunnat Jamaat, known as a recipient of military and intelligence agency support.

Likewise, attacks by PTI leader Khan against *Geo TV*, which might be explained simply by the channel's critical approach to the party, take on special significance in light of its strengthening ties to ISI. For the past several months, links between PTI and the spy service have been a matter of [increasing concern](#) for the ruling party. In addition, some journalists fear a political-military alliance that would make their work conditions, and independent political coverage, even more difficult and dangerous.

The PTI leader recently has been trying to add to the military's power by giving it a seat on the commission in charge of investigating the alleged election fraud of 2013. This growing alliance with an organization that Reporters Without Borders categorized as a "press freedom predator," amounts to additional pressure on media professionals seen as becoming too interested for their own good in PTI or ISI, or who take a critical tone towards these organizations.

Last 26 April, following the attack on Hamid Mir, Khan [issued an official communiqué](#) demanding an apology by *Geo News* for "baseless allegations and media vilification of the Pakistan Army and ISI." Khan also accused the channel of having "aided and abetted in the general election rigging from prematurely announcing the results" and of "conducting a deliberate campaign to malign the military and demoralize our soldiers."

The two scourges of the press: violence and threats

In a country beset by all manner of enemies of free and independent information, Pakistan is one of the deadliest countries for media professionals. Now that the media are trying against all odds to fight the physical threat emanating from armed groups, attacks of all sorts from the political opposition, from a government fringe, from religious and military groups may finally muzzle a press that already suffers an unprecedented level of self-censorship.

Pakistan is ranked 158th of 180 countries in the Reporters Without Borders [world press freedom index for 2014](#). From 2009 to 2011, the country was the deadliest one for journalists. Over the past three years, at least 18 journalists have been killed in the country.

Murders of media workers

2014:

- 2 journalists killed (out of 66 worldwide)
- 4 media assistants killed (out of 11 worldwide)

2013:

- 7 journalists killed (out of 79 worldwide)
- 0 media assistants killed (out of 4 worldwide)

2012:

- 9 journalists killed (out of 87 worldwide)
- 1 media assistant killed (out of 7 worldwide)

2011:

- 10 journalists killed (out of 67 worldwide)
- 0 media assistant killed (out of 2 worldwide)

2010:

- 11 journalists (out of 58 worldwide)
- 1 media assistant killed (out of 1 worldwide)

2009:

- 5 journalists killed (out of 75 worldwide)
 - 0 media assistants killed (out of 1 worldwide)
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