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International Journalist Body Urges Pakistan to Rethink Laws Restricting Press Freedom

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The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) has called on Pakistan's top judiciary to immediately review legal measures that threaten press freedom, particularly the controversial amendments made to the country's cybercrime law. The letter, sent to Chief Justice Yahya Afridi, reflects growing international concern over rising censorship and state control of independent journalism in Pakistan.

The IFJ, a global organization representing over 600,000 journalists in 142 countries, sent a formal letter to Pakistan's Supreme Court urging a full legal review of how recent laws are being used to target journalists. The letter, authored by IFJ General Secretary Anthony

Bellanger, outlines how the current administration's policies have created an increasingly hostile environment for reporters and media outlets.

At the heart of the issue is the Prevention of Electronic Crimes (Amendment) Act, or PECA. This law, originally enacted in 2016 to combat cybercrime, has been heavily criticized for being expanded into a tool of censorship. The law was amended earlier this year by the government of Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, despite strong objections from journalist unions such as the Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists (PFUJ), civil society organizations, and most major opposition parties.

Under the revised PECA, individuals accused of spreading "false information" that might cause "fear or unrest" can face up to three years in prison and fines of approximately USD 7,200. Critics argue that the law is vaguely worded and arbitrarily enforced, leaving state agencies with broad discretion to decide what qualifies as "fake news." The amendments also grant increased surveillance powers and authorize content takedowns, affecting not only mainstream outlets but also independent journalists operating on social media.

The PFUJ and other rights groups have strongly condemned the changes, warning they will only increase self-censorship. With no clear legal definition of what constitutes misinformation, the state retains sweeping authority to suppress dissent under the pretext of preserving order. According to Bellanger, these measures directly contradict Pakistan's international commitments to uphold press freedom.

The IFJ's 2024–25 South Asia Press Freedom Report offers a troubling view of the current climate. Between May 2024 and April 2025, Pakistani journalists were subjected to at least 34 serious violations of press freedom, including seven targeted killings. The report names Pakistan as the second-deadliest country for journalists in the Asia-Pacific region, just behind Bangladesh.

Tensions escalated further when an Islamabad court recently banned more than two dozen YouTube channels affiliated with independent journalists and opposition figures. The decision came after a report from the National Cyber Crime Investigating Agency, a government-run body, which claimed that the content violated PECA and posed a threat to national security.

Major Pakistani outlets such as *Dawn* have denounced the crackdown, calling it an abuse of legal authority and a coordinated attempt to silence criticism. In a recent editorial, *Dawn*

described the bans as “a fresh example of how PECA has been weaponized to silence critical voices.”

Although Pakistan remains a signatory to multiple international agreements that guarantee freedom of speech and the press, critics argue that the government’s recent actions contradict these obligations. The IFJ’s letter stands as a warning that press freedom is not only a domestic issue but one with serious international implications.

As legal pressure builds and global attention intensifies, the future of Pakistan’s media landscape may hinge on whether the judiciary steps in to correct what many believe is a dangerous overreach by the state. For now, journalists continue to operate in an environment where speaking the truth increasingly comes at a cost.