[**Less pressure**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1685581/less-pressure)

[Huma Yusuf](https://www.dawn.com/authors/252/huma-yusuf)Published April 18, 2022 - Updated a day ago

The writer is a political and integrity risk analyst.

THE Council of Pakistan Newspaper Editors in January released a report detailing how media freedom in Pakistan had progressively declined under PTI rule. At the time, Shehbaz Sharif took notice of the report, commenting that Pakistan would lose its GSP-Plus trading status with the EU and deter other foreign investment if it did not improve the environment for the press.

This is hardly the resounding, principled defence of media freedom that one would want from political leaders who are fashioning themselves as the saviours of Pakistani democracy. But it is the type of practical assessment that may spur meaningful action from a politician known for pragmatism and outcomes. And after the three-and-a-half-year battering that the press has endured during Imran Khan’s tenure, any steps towards improved media freedom — irrespective of what motivates them — should be welcomed. But is the younger Sharif ready to take them?

The clampdown on media is among the darkest aspects of Khan’s legacy. Pakistan slipped by six points to 145th position in the World Press Freedom Index 2021. During Khan’s tenure, the media was stripped of freedom and funding. Journalists were harassed, abducted and tortured. News outlets were denied advertising revenue or blocked outright. The PTI government also worked hard (though mercifully failed) to centralise media control through a proposed Pakistan Media Development Authority, which would have had the power to shut down any news outlet, without offering any notice or justification, or being subject to legal challenge.

The most absurd demonstration of the PTI government’s disdain for the press was the passage of the Protection of Journalists and Media Professionals Act 2021, long sought as a way to offer some recourse for journalists under threat. Section 6 of that bill undermined the legislation entirely, as it prohibited media workers from spreading “false information”, advocating hatred or inciting violence. The vague wording of the section was widely perceived as an attempt by the government to muzzle journalists, empowering the state to label all critical reporting as fake news.

Will the new set-up defend press freedom?

The recent political turbulence has eased pressure on the press. As institutions have been embroiled in power tussles, journalists have noted a slowdown in directives, less harassment, and increased opportunities for critical reporting. How long will this last? What can one expect from a PML-N-led coalition, given the party’s own sordid history with the press, from Najam Sethi’s 1999 arrest on trumped-up treason charges to the passage in 2015 of the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, which enabled a crackdown on online free speech?

Restoring a modicum of press freedom should be a no-brainer for the coalition government. This should include an easing off on news outlets as well as concrete acts such as the removal of Section 6 from the journalists’ protection legislation and increasing government advertising budgets for news outlets. The Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists has already demanded as much from Sharif.

Such steps would quickly demonstrate that the Sharif-led coalition government is truly committed to the democratic values it championed during the no-confidence vote, and that it intends to approach governance in a radically different way from Khan. It would also change the growing public perception that all our political leaders are merely puppets, caught in an endless game of musical chairs, and give hope that genuine democratic progress is possible.

The coalition parties under Sharif have a choice to make. They can either sink to Khan’s level and play his dangerous games, or they can learn from their experience as an embattled opposition — as well as from the resilience of our Constitution as demonstrated by recent events — and do things differently, better. This choice will apply across all areas of governance, but also in how they approach the media.

The recent arrests by the FIA of PTI social media activists on charges of smearing the army and judiciary and the suspension of thousands of PTI-linked social media accounts are tactics from PTI’s censorship and intimidation book. As the battle of narratives between Khan and the military over Cable­gate escalates, we’re likely to see the establishment resort to various means to prevent the armed forces from being publicly mali­gned. This may include pressure on the media to promote one narrative over the other, including through undemocratic means such as media blackouts of PTI rallies.

The new government must work hard to prevent this. Such a crackdown will further rile PTI ranks, and give their conspiracies and victimhood narratives more power. It will also confirm to those who had serious reservations about Khan’s ruling tactics that the alternatives are not much better. For the sake of foreign investment, if nothing else, let’s hope Sharif defends Pakistan’s beleaguered press.

*The writer is a political and integrity risk analyst.*

**Twitter:** [**@humayusuf**](https://twitter.com/humayusuf)

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