**Death and truth**

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APRIL 23 marked six months since the death of journalist Arshad Sharif in Kenya. This week the Pakistan Press Foundation announced the 2023 Press Freedom Award for the journalist posthumously on the eve of World Press Freedom Day.

Although Arshad Sharif`s murder is now over six months old, the mystery surrounding his death remains unsolved. According to the findings of the team that had been appointed by the Pakistani government to look into the issue, the journalist`s killing was a `planned targeted assassination` that involved `transnational characters` thus contradicting the version of the Kenyan police that said the tragedy was due to a case of mistaken identity.

The Arshad Sharif case and many other instances of media intimidation that have surfaced reveal the chokehold that Pakistani journalists must contend with as they try to do their job. If Sharif, a well-known and well-liked television host with a huge following could be murdered with such impunity then it is clear that those with smaller platforms or no platforms would be completely unable to do their jobs without facing harassment at the hands of the government, the agencies, or other actors such as street gangs and warlords.

The Pakistani journalist thus tries to do the job of finding the truth and taking it to the public under extremely dif ficult circumstances. Beyond the high-profile cases of Arshad Sharif and Saleem Shehzad who was found dead in a canal a few hours` drive from the capital city in 2011, his body bearing hideous torture marks, there have been scores of cases of harassment, persecution and unexplained murder of journalists.

Investigations are shoddy perhaps because the clues point to some dreaded `hidden hands` trials are incomplete and convictions few. Out of 53 cases of journalists killed in the period 20122022, there were convictions in only two.

Consequently, the recent findings of Freedom Network (whose mandate is to defend freedom of expression) that conditions under which journalists must work remain dire, come as no surprise. We live in a culture where successive rulers have had no qualms about seeking to muzzle freedom of expression directly or through laws,when they have been the target of criticism.

Covering the recent situation, Freedom Network has noted in its report that at the minimum `140 cases of threats and violations against media and its practitioners, including journalists and other media professionals, as well as media establishments, took place in Pakistan between May 2022 and March 2023. This is a staggering two-thirds increase in the number of violations over the preceding year, when the number of cases was 86` Ironically, Islamabad itself and not other areas noted for urban crime or militancy was stated to be the most hazardous place in the country for journalists. And shamefully, `the largest single-source threat actor identified by the vic-tims, or their families, were political parties... , followed by `state actors and functionaries` and `criminal gangs`.

What good is it then when the state and political leaders vow to defend media freedom? It is mere lip service: the powerful publicly promise to aid a truly free press where journalists are not harassed for investigative reports and for expos.

ing the corruption of influence-wielding politicians and military leaders. Many journalists who get wind of such stories are forced to abandon them even before they are investigated let alone reported.

It is rare for journalists to pursue a story that exposes those with clout without receiving threats. The murder of Arshad Sharif is an example; it points to how nefarious elements who hound and harass journalists can even arrange for attacks on journalists in faraway countries with relative ease.

A democracy requires a free press. Withoutknowing the facts reported by an independent media, the public is in no position to make informed opinions about who should, or should not, rule the country on the basis of their deeds or misdeeds. In this, the government, regardless of its own performance, should abide by the dictates of democracy and protect journalists from harm as they write their stories. Freedom Network`s executive director has pointed out: `It is ironic that Pakistan in 2021 became the first country in Asia to legislate on safety of journalists but one and a half years later the federal and Sindh journalists` safety laws have not helped a single journalist resultingin the increasing violence against them.

There are a handful of politicians who have realised the dangers that journalists face and who have worked hard to ensure the passage of the federal Protection of Journalists and Media Professionals Act, 2021, to provide some measures against intimidation. But how does one enforce the law? Despite its passage, journalists continue to be intimidated and killed as in the case of Arshad Sharif. Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif would do well to heed the call of media practitioners and, at the very least, notify the safety commission required by the law. Otherwise this culture of intimidation and violence will continue unabated.

As a journalist it is extremely frustrating to see special days commemorated, special reports released and special speeches made on behalf of the freedom of the press when no one really believes that it is even a possibility. Technically, Pakistan is a democracy but in reality, the press isn`t free and journalists must constantly look out for people following them or the muzzle of a gun.

Under these circumstances, the only truth that canbe producedisthatthereisnotruthsave that which has been cleared as innocuous enough to mean nothing at all. In Pakistani journalism, the truth is simply that the procurement and reportage of truth is not possible in the current circumstances, which show no signs of changing for the better anytime soon.  The writer is an attorney teaching constitutional law and political philosophy.

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