**Anti media trend**

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IT has been a bleak year in most respects.

So it`s not surprising to learn that 2020 has also been a dire year for press freedom globally.

Recent reports from the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) underscore the threat to free media, and highlight the worsening situation, even in ostensible democracies.

CPJ found that the number of journalists murdered in retaliation for their work more than doubled from last year`s tally in 2020, increasing from 10 to 21. The highest numbers of retaliatory kilhngs occurred in Mexico, Afghanistan and the Philippines, with criminal groups the most frequent perpetrators.

A record number of journalists 274 were also in prison in relation to their reporting as of Dec 1. China is the world`s top jailer of journalists for the second year in a row, followed by Turkey, Egypt and Saudi Arabia (note: the CPJ only tracks those who are imprisoned, not those who are abducted or disappeared).

This bad news is partly driven by the flaming anti-press rhetoric of outgoing President Donald Trump. With his open disdain for news reporters, and blind eye for the Saudi government`s role in the 2018 murder of WashingtonPostcolumnistJamalKhashoggi, Trump in effect sanctioned the anti-press activities of authoritarians everywhere.

It`s no coincidence that the countries with the highest journalist killing tolls Mexico and the Philippines have leaders who have mimicked Trump`s anti-press stance, denigrating the news media in briefings.

Trump`s most frequent charge against his critics terming their reportage `fake news`has been taken literally by aspiring authoritarians, and 34 journalists have been jailed for publishing `false news` as compared to 31 last year.

President-elect Joe Biden faces significant pressure f rom media rights and CSOs to reinstate the US`s global leadership on press freedom. He has hinted he will seek to redress Trump`s toxicity, both through profree media messaging on the campaign trail and through his selection of his White House press team. The Congress is also contemplating strengthening sanctions regimes against those complicit in human rights abuses against journalists, including limiting US assistance to governments with a poor track record on press freedom. Such measures will get a fillip under a Biden administration.

But the Biden effect will be gradual.

After all, the US has to get its own house in order first. According to the US press freedom tracker, 311 journalists in the US were attacked and 110 either arrested or charged during the course of their work in 2020. The White House`s top priority will be re-establishing relationships with the US media.Press freedom will also inevitably take a back seat to the Covid-19 response and related global economic recession. The US and EU which continue to defend press freedom will also continue to make pragmatic trade-offs in terms of when they prioritise free media in diplomatic relations (for example, EU calls to free imprisoned Turkish journalists have been muted by the need to engage on issues such as migration).

Increased multipolarity also means that smaller countries will be able to choose between the West`s demands for a demonstrated commitment to press freedom, and China`s and Russia`s more laissez-faire attitude to the same.

Beyond the Trump effect, journalist killings have also increased because of the trend of impunity. In this context, the judicial decision earlier this year to overturn the murder convictions of those accused in journalist Daniel Pearl`s 2002 killing may send a troubling message about impunity for press killings. No amount of lip serviceby Biden or other Western administrations will matter if journalists` killers are not routinely brought to justice.

A key challenge to restoring press freedom is that the public is not clamouring for it. This is either because mid-dle-class media consumers buy into antipress rhetoric, beheving journalists to be unpatriotic, corrupt, or agenda-driven, or because state censorship is so effective that most news consumers are unaware of the extent to which the industry is threatened and the information they receive is filtered.

Both these dynamics are in play in Pakistan.

People need to pay more attention to the news headlines about missing journalists, online harassment, and draconian cybersecurity laws, and piece together the bigger picture.

2021 may present an opportunity to restore public demand for, and trust in, credible news reporting. People are no doubt united in their need for accurate information about governments` handling of the ongoing Covid-19 crisis, the efficacy ofvaccinesandtransparencyofvaccinadon roll-outs, and state responses to the impending economic crisis. This coupled with a fresh tone on press freedom from the Biden administration may help turn the tide for journalists under threat.  The writer is a freelance journalist.

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