**The perils of being a journalist**

BY R A F I A Z A K A R I A 2021-04-14

BEING a journalist in Pakistan is a dangerous proposition. A noose is put around your neck when you begin and it is tightened gradually as journalists you know are `disappeared` or harassed or murdered outright. Many of those who manage to stay afloat are targets. The tiniest act of rebellion or upsetting someone powerful can constitute a real threat for the journalists of the country.

Ajay Laalwani, who worked for a newspaper, was in a barbershop in Sukkur on the evening of March 18. Suddenly two motorcycles and a car with four passengers drove up. They began to spray Laalwani with bullets and then sped away. Laalwani was taken to hospital but he did not survive the brutal attack. Ashig Jatoi, the editor of the newspaper, said he believes that Laalwani`s writing and reporting could have motivated the killing. Once again, whether this was actually true will remain mired in mystery. Past tensions between the reporter and law enforcement were mentioned and the fear that investigations might not be carried out the way they should was expressed.

In the days before the incident, Laalwani had received threats and was being harassed. Those sharing the news on social media attributed the killing to well-known `unknown culprits`. In an effort to show that the case was being taken seriously and investigated, the police announced that a special team had been created to investigate the killing. This in itself is ironic because prior to Laalwani`s killing, the police had been harassing journalists, threatening them with consequences.

On March 15, the police had arrested a number of journalists and political activists and registered cases against them under the Anti-Terrorism Act while they were protesting the killing of a Sindh University student named Irfan Jatoi in an alleged `police encounter`.

Of course, it seems fair to say that this case, along with so many others in which journalists have been killed, will not be solved. There are so many cases that require answers. One of them is the killing of Qais Javed who worked for the newspaper Ehadnama. He had also started his own web channel. He was shot dead in D.I. Khan inDecember 2020. But like so many others, he is just a number. One fine day, `unknown gunmen` appeared, sprayed him with bullets and absconded without being caught. Despite the passage of three months since the killing, there is no sign of the case being solved.

The latest death is of a young man named Waseem Alam who was shot dead in Karak when he was returning home on his motorcycle on Saturday.

Alam was taken to the hospital where he was pronounced dead on arrival. An FIR has been regis-tered. In Alam`s case, f amily enmity has been cited as a motive. Police strongly suspect the involvement of Alam`s father in the deed. His family reportedly said that Alam had not conveyed to them that he had received threats. But unless such cases are pursued and investigated and the murderer convicted in a court of law, one will never know the truth. And journalists like him will continue to become yet another statistic.

One can go on and on enumerating the killing and intimidation of Pakistani journalists. One can go on and on about how the cases are never solved. All of it is pointless for the simple reason that everyone knows that those who do not toe the line or are outspoken are targeted and made an example of.

This then is the primitive state of public discourse in Pakistan. Instead of tolerating differing points of view, instead of creating forums wheredivergent views can be expressed and discussed and a culture of tolerance fostered, the voices of those who disagree are muf fled in various ways by various actors, state or non-state. This is not very dif ferent from what primitive man faced when he did not agree with his tribe. He would be made an example of to warn the rest of the clan.

Those tribes that did this accrued a survival disadvantage. While unity, whether it is tribal or national is important, survival requires the existence of divergent ideas. Killing or intimidating journalists in this sense does not simply wreak havoc on the present, it condemns the possibility of the future. Evolution after all is based on adaptability and the existence of diversity of thought and it is impossible without the truth tellers that present the reality of the situation. Without them, only one version of the truth thrives and difference of opinion is exterminated.

The people in this environment never develop the skills to tolerate words or ideas that are different. Moreover, they risk being duped, as there is no guarantee that the version of truth that they have been believing and reading is not actually what was happening in the country.

Pakistan`s legacy of authoritarianism means that no one pays much attention to the growing roster of threats to journalists. With everyone eking out a marginal and precarious existence, few have sympathy to spare for the brave men and women who die or are picked up or face extreme threats because they were not willing to give up on a principle. To those who target journalists, principles such as the belief in the freedom of speech is an indulgence. An attitude such as this is the consequence of decades of devaluation of speech, denigr ation of the bravest in the nation and a low regard for the truth. In the meantime, the bodies keep piling up, the `unknown` gunmen appearing again and again to kill or kidnap those who have the courage to tell the truth and to believe in a principle.  The writer is an attorney teaching constitutional law and political philosophy.

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