

Notice: Undefined index: et_header_layout in /home/hrwfe90/domains/hrwf.eu/public_html/wp-content/plugins/pdf-print/pdf-print.php on line 1214

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PAKISTAN urged to reconsider bills that could undermine press freedom

CPJ urges Pakistan lawmakers to reconsider bills that could undermine press freedom

Pakistan lawmakers should reject or revise four draft bills likely to undermine press freedom and consult with journalists and other stakeholders in a transparent review process before putting the bills to a vote, the Committee to Protect Journalists said Friday.

CPJ (04.08.2023) – On July 20, Information Minister Marriyum Aurangzeb introduced in the lower house of parliament a [draft bill](#) amending the [ordinance](#) governing the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA), the country's broadcast regulator, according to [news reports](#).

The bill would empower the regulator to oversee the dissemination of “authentic news” and prohibit media organizations from spreading “disinformation,” a loosely defined clause that the nongovernmental Human Rights Commission of Pakistan [warned](#) “strays into censorship territory.”

On Wednesday, the National Assembly, the lower house of parliament, [passed](#) the PEMRA amendment bill, which will be moved to the Senate. The federal cabinet has approved two other draft bills and is soon [expected](#) to introduce them in parliament. Another bill, which would amend the [2016 Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act](#) (PECA), is pending cabinet approval. Local journalists and rights groups fear that these bills would entrench measures to undermine data security and free expression online before Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif's government is dissolved later this month. The bills would provide sweeping powers to the incoming [caretaker government](#), which Sharif's ruling coalition and the military are both seeking to control.

“We are alarmed by the Pakistan government's apparent attempts to bulldoze four draft bills undermining press freedom through parliament ahead of the political transition scheduled for later this month,” said Beh Lih Yi, CPJ's Asia program coordinator. “There needs to be a substantive debate on the bills and their far-reaching impacts. Pakistan's lawmakers must ensure ample time to review the draft bills in consultation with civil society and journalists before coming to a vote.”

Sharif has [proposed](#) that parliament [be dissolved](#) on August 9,

before handing over power to a [caretaker administration](#), paving the way for a general election.

CPJ [has documented](#) numerous press freedom violations in Pakistan since former Prime Minister Imran Khan was ousted from power in April 2022, resulting in an ongoing [political crisis](#). Mainstream news channels have ceased coverage of Khan following a [de facto ban](#) and [pressure](#) from the military.

On July 26, the federal cabinet [approved](#) two of the draft bills, the E-Safety Bill 2023 and the Personal Data Protection Bill 2023, paving the way for a parliamentary vote.

The E-Safety Bill would establish a new regulatory body responsible for registering and monitoring news websites, including those already operated by media outlets, as well as online channels, including those on YouTube. The agency would be empowered to take notice of and impose penalties for alleged cybercrime violations, including publishing “false” news, which the Pakistan Digital Editors Alliance, a local journalists’ association, [warns](#) could be used to stifle free speech.

The Personal Data Protection Bill would [mandate data localization](#) within Pakistan for companies, including social media platforms. The bill provides for “sensitive personal data” to be handed over to the Pakistan government on grounds of “public order” or “national security,” which may compromise journalists’ privacy, according to a May [draft](#) of the bill and Farieha Aziz, a freelance journalist and co-founder of the digital rights organization Bolo Bhi, who spoke with CPJ by phone.

Separately, the government is [set](#) to introduce a series of amendments to PECA and the country’s social media rules, establishing a prison term of five years and a fine of 1 million rupees (US\$3,484) for disseminating “fake or false information” online.

The amendments would empower the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority to order social media companies to block or remove content that “incites or is likely to incite [the] public,” is “known to be fake or false,” or “contains aspersions against the judiciary or armed forces of Pakistan.” Social media companies deemed non-compliant could have their services blocked or restricted.

CPJ has [repeatedly documented](#) how the PECA has been used to detain and harass journalists for their work.

It remains unclear when these three bills will be brought to a vote in parliament, Aziz told CPJ.

The PEMRA amendment bill defines “disinformation” as “verifiably false” information disseminated with the intention to “cause harm to the reputation of or to harass any person for political, personal, or financial interest...without making an effort to get other person’s point of view or not giving [that view] proper coverage.”

Aziz and [other journalists](#) have expressed concern about that definition, with Aziz saying it could encourage powerful figures to withhold comment and curb the media’s ability to publish critical stories. The draft bill also increases the fine for violations from 1 million rupees to 10 million rupees (US\$34,837).

Afzal Butt, president of the Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists, told the newspaper [Dawn](#) that he believes broadcasters and the journalists’ union should be able to vote on decisions by PEMRA, which has a [history](#) of [suspending](#) broadcasters and [censoring](#) their content. The draft amendment introduced to parliament grants the union and local broadcasters one non-voting representative each at the agency.

CPJ called and messaged Aurangzeb for comment but did not receive any replies.

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