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Media Regulation and Freedom of Expression in Pakistan: The Role of PEMRA, PECA, and State Influence in Shaping News

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Abstract

This article undertakes a comprehensive analysis of the regulatory ecosystem governing media freedom in Pakistan, arguing that the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority, the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, and extra-legal state influence do not operate as discrete mechanisms but as a single, self-reinforcing system of coercive information management designed to manufacture a compliant public sphere. Through a critical examination of the PEMRA Ordinance 2002 and its deliberately ambiguous content restriction clauses, the study reveals how the statutory framework creates an administrative straitjacket where undefined terms like national security and morality grant unfettered discretionary censorship power. The analysis further dissects the draconian trajectory of PECA from its 2016 enactment to its punitive 2023 amendments, demonstrating how the criminalization of online speech, the reversal of the burden of proof, and the elimination of procedural safeguards have transformed digital law into a weapon that chills both online expression and mainstream broadcast journalism through a calculated crossover effect. Beyond formal legal instruments, the article maps the invisible architecture of state influence encompassing economic coercion through government advertising withdrawal, the intelligence apparatus slip system of pre-publication editorial directives, and the climate of existential fear manufactured through enforced disappearances, torture, and lethal violence against journalists with near-total impunity. The study contributes to media governance scholarship by filling a critical gap in the literature, which has predominantly treated these mechanisms in isolation, failing to theorize their synergistic and cumulative effect as an interlocking system where each component amplifies the coercive power of the others. The findings establish that Pakistani journalism has been fundamentally restructured from an adversarial watchdog into a compliant transmission belt for state narratives, a transformation achieved not through overt dictatorship but through the sophisticated deployment of legal, financial, and coercive instruments that systematically transmute the constitutional right to free expression into a conditional privilege contingent upon political obedience.

Keywords: Media Regulation, Freedom of Expression, Pakistan, PEMRA, PECA, State Censorship

Introduction

The constitutional architecture of Pakistan enshrines a powerful promise under Article 19, guaranteeing every citizen the right to freedom of speech and expression, subject to reasonable restrictions imposed by law in the interest of state security, public order, or morality (Siddique, 2023). This foundational pledge catalyzed an unprecedented media boom in the early 2000s, as the liberalization policies under General Pervez Musharraf's regime dismantled the state monopoly, leading to an explosion of private television news channels that fundamentally transformed the public sphere. However, this era of exuberant journalistic freedom was not a linear progression. The historical trajectory has since veered sharply from that initial boom into

a deeply constrained present, where the same state apparatus that midwived a vibrant media landscape now deploys a sophisticated architecture of legal and coercive mechanisms to systematically constrict it (Jahangir & Sultan, 2022). This paradox, a landscape of over 40 news channels coexisting with draconian laws, defines the central crisis of Pakistani journalism, where the institutional exuberance of the airwaves belies a pervasive and deeply internalized climate of fear.

To navigate this complex reality, a precise operational definition of core concepts is essential. "Freedom of Expression" within the Pakistani legal and cultural context extends beyond a mere negative liberty against state interference; it is constantly negotiated against potent, often supra-constitutional, red lines involving the military establishment's prestige, judicial sanctity, and a particularized state interpretation of Islamic morality (Hassan, 2024). This right is perpetually in tension with a layered regime of "Media Regulation," a term that, in its intended purpose, denotes a legal framework to ensure fairness, plurality, and professional standards. In its applied practice, however, regulation has been transmuted into a weaponized instrument of pre-publication censorship and post-publication reprisal, systematically redefined to manage political dissent rather than uphold journalistic ethics (Mehdi, 2021). The chasm between the ideal of an independent regulator and a punitive gatekeeper is the primary terrain where the struggle for press freedom is waged, making the definitional clarity of this distortion critical to the entire analysis.

This landscape of control is governed by three distinct but deeply interwoven pillars that operate in a self-reinforcing synergy. The first pillar is the statutory watchdog, the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA), which wields immense administrative power to suspend licenses, impose crippling fines, and issue blanket bans on content and personalities (Naqvi, 2023). The second pillar is the digital crime law, the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA), particularly its draconian 2023 amendment, which criminalizes online speech critical of state institutions with non-bailable offences and punitive prison terms, effectively acting as a digital dagger against online and mainstream journalists alike (Digital Rights Foundation, 2022). The third, most nebulous yet most coercive pillar, is the direct and indirect "State Influence" exerted by the military establishment and intelligence agencies through economic coercion, an institutionalised "slip system" of editorial directives, and the shadow of enforced disappearances, which creates an unparalleled chilling effect that formal laws alone could never achieve (Sarwar, 2024).

This paper argues that the regulatory triad of PEMRA, PECA, and extra-legal state influence has systematically transmuted the constitutional right to free expression into a conditional privilege, weaponizing vague legal provisions to manufacture consent and suppress dissent, thereby reshaping Pakistan's news media into a compliant arm of the state. This is not a system of regulation designed for journalistic accountability but a calculated ecosystem of information warfare deployed against the public sphere. The machinery operates not through constant, overt intervention but by establishing a punishing precedent that makes self-censorship the only rational strategy for survival for media owners and journalists (Rehman, 2023). Consequently, the Pakistani newsroom has been fundamentally restructured from a site of editorial contestation into a conveyor belt for a statist narrative, a transformation that hollows out the democratic function of the fourth estate by conflating professional criticism with sedition and framing state security not as a legitimate concern to be debated, but as a sacred ideology to be ritually affirmed.

Literature Review

Media regulation in fragile democracies frequently reveals a troubling duality, where laws ostensibly designed for social harmony are repurposed as instruments of political suppression. The most incisive framework for understanding this is "authoritarian legality," a mode of governance where repressive laws are meticulously crafted and judicially enforced to lend democratic legitimacy to coercive state actions (Varol, 2021). Such legal systems are characterized by deliberately vague statutory language, granting enforcement bodies maximum discretionary power to interpret sedition or defamation, transforming law into a sword for narrative control (Coronado, 2023). In the Pakistani context, this is acutely visible in how Article 19's reasonable restrictions clause has been stretched into a gaping loophole, swallowing the fundamental right it was meant to circumscribe. The regulatory edifice actively engineers the marketplace of ideas, ensuring only state-congruent narratives reach a mass audience, delegitimising adversarial journalism on grounds of its perceived threat to a national security conception curated by the military establishment (Awan & Sial, 2024). This establishes that the crisis is not one of regulatory failure but of regulatory design, where the goal from inception has been the manufacturing of consent through the systematic legal annihilation of dissent, a process where national security becomes a floating signifier for regime protection (Mazzoleni & Siapera, 2022).

A second thematic stream traces the historical evolution of Pakistani media censorship, charting a morphological shift from overt pre-publication censorship of military dictatorships to market-based, post-publication coercion characteristic of democratic eras. During martial law regimes, press control involved physical intimidation, executive decrees, and pre-publication scrutiny that physically prevented dissenting views from reaching audiences (Niazi, 2022). The scholarly consensus reveals a profound "liberalisation paradox," wherein the explosion of private television channels in 2002 actually created conditions for a more sophisticated regulatory crackdown than ever before (Ahmed, 2021). Financially precarious news channels became acutely vulnerable to two precise forms of state leverage, namely the withdrawal of government advertising revenue as an economic kill switch and the selective, punitive use of PEMRA's licensing powers to create perpetual existential threat. Scholars argue this new architecture of coercion operates through market mechanisms and legal instruments simultaneously, making it harder to detect than blunt military censorship (Jamil & Bilal, 2023). The state retroactively punishes a single outlet so severely through license suspension or financial strangulation that the entire industry, observing the consequences, voluntarily aligns its editorial compass with strategic communication objectives, a process of regulatory deterrence far more efficient than prioritarian censorship.

Despite these rich analytical traditions, a significant gap persists because dominant scholarship treats PEMRA, PECA, and state pressure as discrete, standalone subjects of inquiry (Siddiq, 2023). What remains profoundly understudied is the synergistic, cumulative, and interlocking effect of these three forces when they operate as a single, unified regulatory ecosystem. A PEMRA ban on covering a political party works in concert with PECA's threat to criminalise any journalist who tweets about the banned topic, while the unspoken threat of an intelligence operative's visit ensures editors do not even attempt legal workarounds (Khan, 2022). This interlocking system creates a chilling effect far more potent than the sum of its parts, yet scant analytical work maps how a digital domain amendment directly restructures television newsroom editorial decision-making. Furthermore, a particular paucity of research investigates how PECA's criminalisation of online speech fundamentally chills mainstream broadcast content, a chilling crossover the literature has noted only in passing (Digital Rights Foundation, 2023). A journalist arrested under PECA for a critical social media post will inevitably see their television

career terminated, causing broadcasters to self-censor even purely online discourse. This paper therefore offers a holistic analysis, conceptualising PEMRA, PECA, and extra-legal state influence as a single, interlocking system of coercive information management designed to manufacture a compliant public sphere.

Problem Statement

The central problem confronting Pakistani journalism is not the existence of individual repressive laws but the calculated and self-reinforcing synergy between statutory regulation, digital criminalisation, and extra-legal state coercion. The literature demonstrates that PEMRA, PECA, and the informal apparatus of intelligence agency pressure do not operate in isolation. Instead, they form a single, interlocking ecosystem of information control where an administrative broadcast ban is amplified by the threat of criminal prosecution under cybercrime law, while the pervasive fear of enforced disappearance extinguishes any residual will to challenge either. This unified field of coercion has manufactured a pervasive culture of pre-emptive obedience and self-censorship that is far more potent than any single mechanism could achieve independently. Crucially, the scholarship reveals a significant analytical gap, namely the failure to theorise how PECA's criminalisation of online speech spills over to fundamentally chill mainstream broadcast content. This paper addresses the problem of how this regulatory trifecta systematically transmutes the constitutional promise of free expression into a conditional privilege, reshaping the news media into a compliant instrument of state narrative control.

Research Questions:

1. How do the statutory powers of PEMRA (suspensions, fines, blanket bans) and the punitive criminal provisions of PECA jointly create a chilling effect on investigative journalism?
2. What are the formal and informal mechanisms through which state institutions (military, intelligence, and government) directly shape news narratives beyond the legal framework?
3. How has this regulatory trifecta transformed the journalist-source relationship, editorial decision-making, and the overall public sphere in Pakistan?

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, doctrinal, and analytical research methodology to investigate the interlocking system of media regulation and state coercion in Pakistan. The research design is rooted in a critical legal studies approach, examining how formal legal instruments and extra-legal practices operate synergistically to manufacture a compliant public sphere. Data is collected through three primary sources: a comprehensive doctrinal analysis of primary legal texts, including the PEMRA Ordinance 2002, the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act 2016 and its 2023 amendments, and relevant constitutional provisions; a critical review of secondary literature encompassing scholarly journal articles, reports from civil society organizations such as the Digital Rights Foundation, and news media documentation of regulatory actions and state interference; and a case study analysis of emblematic incidents including license suspensions, journalist arrests under PECA, and instances of enforced disappearances and violence. The analysis is structured around thematic coding to identify the mechanisms, intersections, and cumulative effects of statutory regulation, digital criminalization, and state influence, with the objective of mapping how these forces together transmute constitutional rights into conditional privileges.

PEMRA's Regulatory Overreach

The Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority Ordinance of 2002 was fundamentally misframed from its inception, embedding a fatal contradiction that defines its operational

pathology. The ordinance vests PEMRA with a dual and inherently conflicted mandate, tasking it simultaneously with facilitating the growth of a free and independent broadcast media while arming it with sweeping punitive powers to censor content deemed contrary to national security or public morality (Naqvi, 2023). This conflict of interest is not a bureaucratic oversight but a deliberate design feature, as the clauses governing content restriction rely on perilously undefined terms that grant the regulator unfettered discretionary power. The ordinance never defines what constitutes a threat to national security, nor does it operationalise the boundaries of morality or decency, leaving these critical thresholds entirely to the subjective interpretation of PEMRA officials and, by extension, the political and military establishment they serve (Mehdi, 2021). This strategic ambiguity transforms the law from a framework of reasonable restriction into a weapon of arbitrary censorship, where any critical journalism can be retroactively classified as a security violation without the state ever needing to articulate a precise legal standard or provide empirical evidence of the alleged harm. The mandate is thus misframed not by accident but by calculated design, ensuring that the facilitator function remains perpetually subordinate to the censor function.

The mechanisms through which PEMRA operationalises its control constitute a graduated arsenal of economic and editorial warfare designed to punish noncompliant outlets and deter the entire industry. The most spectacular of these mechanisms is the outright suspension of broadcasting licenses, as witnessed in the repeated shutdowns of ARY News, which was taken off air for months following its critical coverage of state institutions, a move justified through vaguely worded allegations of hate speech and security threats that critics argued were pretextual (Jahangir & Sultan, 2022). Beyond the nuclear option of license revocation lies the more insidious weapon of crippling fines and show cause notices, which function not as proportionate penalties but as instruments of financial strangulation that drain the operational capital of independent media houses, forcing them toward either bankruptcy or editorial surrender. Equally potent are the controversial blanket bans that prohibit all broadcast media from reporting on specific individuals, political parties, or events, a mechanism infamously deployed to blackout coverage of the torture allegations made by Shahbaz Gill, the chief of staff to former Prime Minister Imran Khan (Rehman, 2023). These bans represent a form of prior restraint that is constitutionally impermissible yet routinely executed, erasing entire political realities from the public sphere and ensuring that the citizenry remains systematically uninformed about matters of profound democratic consequence.

The final and perhaps most insidious dimension of PEMRA's overreach is the judicialization of censorship, a process through which superior courts, particularly the Islamabad High Court, lend a veneer of constitutional legitimacy to fundamentally extra-constitutional actions. When media outlets challenge PEMRA's bans and punitive orders, the judiciary frequently defers to the executive's invocation of national security, effectively rubber-stamping censorship without rigorous scrutiny of the evidence or the proportionality of the measure (Siddique, 2023). The Islamabad High Court's jurisprudence on media freedom has evolved in a deeply contradictory manner, oscillating between bold pronouncements defending press freedom in the abstract and swift capitulation to state security arguments in concrete cases involving the military establishment or intelligence agencies. This judicial retreat creates a dangerous feedback loop wherein PEMRA issues increasingly draconian orders with the confidence that courts will provide retrospective legal cover, transforming the regulator from an administrative body into a quasi-judicial censor whose decisions carry the imprimatur of judicial approval (Sarwar, 2024). The result is a system where censorship is not merely an executive action but a judicially sanctioned

feature of the regulatory architecture, closing the loop on a perfectly circular system of control that leaves no meaningful avenue for legal redress.

PECA and the Criminalization of Speech Online

The legislative trajectory from the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act 2016 to its draconian 2023 amendment charts a deliberate and accelerating assault on digital expression under the guise of legal refinement. Section 20 of the original PECA, ostensibly crafted to protect the dignity of natural persons from online defamation, was almost immediately weaponised against journalists and political critics, its vague and subjective standard of offence enabling the state to criminalise any speech that caused mere discomfort to powerful figures (Khan, 2022). The 2023 amendments escalated this repressive architecture exponentially by creating a compliant regulatory authority stripped of judicial oversight, removing crucial safeguards such as the requirement for judicial permission before investigations, and criminalising fake news against state institutions with a calculated reversal of the burden of proof onto the accused (Digital Rights Foundation, 2023). This means a journalist must now prove their innocence against charges that are themselves defined by the very state institutions they are accused of defaming. The trajectory reveals a legislative strategy that moves from reactive punishment to proactive deterrence, constructing a digital panopticon where the threat of prosecution is designed to eliminate critical reporting before it materialises, effectively transforming the internet from a space of democratic contestation into a monitored zone of state-sanctioned narrative.

The operationalisation of PECA against individual journalists reveals its true function as a tool of punitive personalisation, where the full coercive weight of the criminal justice system is deployed to make an example of dissenting voices. High profile cases involving journalists such as Imran Riaz Khan, arrested on charges that critics argue were fabricated to silence his trenchant reporting on military interference in politics, and Sami Abraham, whose detention under PECA followed his investigative coverage of the security establishment, demonstrate a systematic pattern of targeting (Sarwar, 2024). Equally emblematic is the case of vlogger Asad Toor, whose arrest on allegations of maligning state institutions underlined how the law is deployed not to remedy genuine harm but to eliminate adversarial journalism through legal harassment. The chilling effect mechanism operates through a precise calculus of fear, where the combination of arrest without warrant, non-bailable clauses that deny presumption of liberty, and the spectre of lengthy prison sentences creates an existential threat that simultaneously stifles digital reporting and mainstream broadcast journalism (Jahangir & Sultan, 2022). When a prominent journalist is dragged from their home in a dawn raid for a tweet, every other journalist learns the lesson that survival requires silence, and the deterrent message reverberates across the entire media ecosystem with surgical precision.

A critically underexamined dimension of PECA's architecture is its deliberate blurring of the lines between digital and broadcast media, creating a chilling crossover effect that extends the law's terror far beyond the online realm. The legislation is strategically deployed to prosecute content that originates on social media platforms but is subsequently amplified or discussed by traditional television channels, a mechanism that forces broadcasters to self-censor even stories they have not themselves generated (Digital Rights Foundation, 2023). An editor who permits on-air discussion of a Twitter thread critical of a state institution knows that their channel can face regulatory retaliation and that their journalists can face individual criminal liability under PECA, even though the broadcast content itself falls under PEMRA's jurisdiction. This jurisdictional entanglement creates a regulatory double jeopardy where a single piece of critical commentary triggers simultaneous action under two separate legal regimes, multiplying the coercive pressure exponentially (Mehdi, 2021). The practical consequence is that television

newsrooms, acutely aware of this cross-platform liability, now exercise pre-emptive caution over even the most mundane digital content, effectively extending PECA's censorship logic into the editorial decision-making processes of every major broadcast outlet and shrinking the space for independent journalism across all media simultaneously.

The cumulative effect of this digital dagger is a fundamental restructuring of the journalist-source relationship and the very epistemology of investigative reporting in Pakistan. The knowledge that any digital communication, any confidential message, and any online research trail can be retrospectively mined and weaponised under PECA has created a pervasive atmosphere of surveillance that corrodes the foundational trust upon which adversarial journalism depends (Siddiq, 2023). Whistleblowers and sources, fearing that their digital interactions with journalists will be traced and prosecuted, increasingly withdraw from engagement, drying up the informal information networks that sustain investigative work. Simultaneously, journalists are forced to abandon digital tools essential to modern reporting, from encrypted messaging applications to online document repositories, retreating to analog methods that are slower, less secure, and far less effective in a rapidly moving news environment (Naqvi, 2023). This technological regression, imposed not by a lack of capacity but by a deliberate legal regime of fear, represents a form of information warfare that targets the logistical infrastructure of journalism itself. The digital dagger thus cuts not only at the published product but at the pre-publication processes of gathering, verifying, and corroborating information, ensuring that critical stories are killed not by editorial decree but by the simple impossibility of safely assembling them in the first place.

Direct and Indirect State Influence on Newsrooms

Economic coercion through the manipulation of government advertising constitutes one of the most potent yet legally invisible instruments of media control in Pakistan. As the single largest advertiser in the country, the federal and provincial governments wield a financial weapon that can sustain or strangle any media outlet with surgical precision, deploying the systematic withdrawal of public sector advertisements as a financial ban against critical voices (Amin, 2022). This mechanism operates with devastating effectiveness because Pakistani news channels, operating in a precarious and oversaturated market, depend disproportionately on government advertising revenue for their basic operational survival. When an outlet publishes or broadcasts content that challenges the official narrative, the state does not need to issue a formal censorial decree but instead quietly turns off the advertising tap, creating an immediate liquidity crisis that forces owners to choose between editorial independence and financial solvency, a choice that market logic almost invariably resolves in favor of capitulation (Yusuf, 2023). The insidious genius of this weapon lies in its deniability, as the state can always claim budget constraints or shifting marketing strategies rather than admitting a punitive motive. This economic strangulation ensures that even the most defiant media houses eventually internalise the boundaries of permissible discourse, calibrating their journalism not to journalistic ethics but to the unspoken red lines that guarantee continued access to the lifeblood of government advertising revenue (Qureshi & Ali, 2024).

Beyond the formal mechanisms of economic pressure lies the shadow architecture of direct editorial intervention operated by the military establishment through its sophisticated slip system. This institutionalised mechanism involves the daily transmission of directives from Inter-Services Public Relations and intelligence agencies to newsroom gatekeepers, consisting of concise slips that dictate with unambiguous specificity which stories must be killed entirely, which political figures must be downplayed, and which state narratives must be prominently projected (Shah, 2021). These slips are not polite suggestions but non-negotiable commands,

enforced through a well-understood structure of rewards for compliance and severe consequences for defiance that ranges from personal threats to professional annihilation. The slip system represents a form of pre-publication censorship that predates and operates entirely outside the formal legal framework of PEMRA and PECA, rendering constitutional guarantees of press freedom effectively irrelevant because the editorial decisions are intercepted before any law could be invoked (Rashid, 2023). This parallel regulatory architecture, invisible to the formal legal system yet absolutely real to every working journalist and editor, ensures that the newsroom functions not as an autonomous site of journalistic judgment but as a transmission belt for the strategic communication priorities of the military establishment, a reality that exposes the performative nature of official claims about media freedom (Hussain, 2022).

The most terrifying dimension of state influence is the climate of existential fear manufactured through the systematic use of enforced disappearances, torture, and lethal violence against journalists, a machinery of terror whose near-total impunity signals that the state can extinguish critical voices with absolute impunity. The murder of senior journalist Arshad Sharif in Kenya, following his flight from Pakistan after receiving death threats from state agencies, and the enforced disappearance and torture of journalists like Hasnain Shah represent not isolated incidents but a calculated pattern of exemplary violence designed to communicate a singular, unmistakable message to the entire profession (Iqbal, 2023). When journalists are abducted from their homes in the dead of night, held incommunicado for months, and subjected to torture that leaves physical and psychological scars, and when their tormentors face no investigation, prosecution, or accountability whatsoever, the lesson inscribed into the collective consciousness of the journalistic community is that the state holds the power of life and death over anyone who transgresses its unspoken boundaries (Zaman, 2024). This impunity is not a failure of the justice system but a deliberate feature of the coercive architecture, a carefully maintained condition that ensures fear remains the foundational emotional register of Pakistani journalism. The spectre of Arshad Sharif haunts every newsroom, a perpetual reminder that the ultimate price of adversarial reporting is not career destruction but physical annihilation (Butt & Malik, 2022).

Complementing these coercive mechanisms is the more subtle but equally consequential cultivation of a patriotic media ecosystem that systematically delegitimises critical journalism as inherently anti-state and treasonous, thereby manufacturing consent through ideological hegemony rather than brute force. Military-backed media houses serve as the institutional anchors of this project, promoting a narrative framework of national security journalism that reframes all political and social issues through the singular lens of state security, effectively collapsing the distinction between the nation and the military establishment (Cheema, 2021). The proliferation of retired military officers as prime-time analysts and talk show hosts further consolidates this ideological capture, populating the airwaves with uniformed voices who command epistemological authority on every subject from economics to foreign policy, drowning out civilian expertise and framing critical journalism as a betrayal of the sacrifices of soldiers (Lodhi, 2023). This patriotic media complex, sustained by generous institutional funding and access that independent outlets cannot match, creates an informational environment where adversarial reporting is preemptively delegitimised not through legal prohibition but through a manufactured consensus that equates dissent with disloyalty (Tahir, 2024). The effect is a profound depoliticisation of the public sphere, where fundamental democratic questions about civil-military relations, budget allocations, and foreign policy alignments are removed from the realm of legitimate debate and consigned to the category of treasonous speech.

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that the crisis of press freedom in Pakistan is not the product of isolated legal instruments or episodic state overreach but the calculated output of a single, interlocking regulatory ecosystem where PEMRA, PECA, and extra-legal state influence function as mutually reinforcing components of a unified machinery of narrative control. The PEMRA Ordinance provides the administrative architecture, a statutory straitjacket whose deliberately undefined terms and inherent conflict of interest between facilitation and censorship create a legal environment where any critical journalism can be retroactively classified as a security violation. PECA supplies the criminal backbone, a digital dagger that transforms political speech into a non-bailable offence, shifts the burden of proof onto the accused journalist, and extends its chilling logic across the digital-broadcast divide through a carefully engineered crossover effect. The invisible hand of state influence completes this architecture, wielding economic strangulation through the advertising weapon, pre-publication editorial direction through the slip system, and the existential terror of enforced disappearances and lethal violence with absolute impunity, all while cultivating a patriotic media ecosystem that ideologically delegitimises adversarial journalism as inherently treasonous. The cumulative effect of this regulatory triad is the systematic transmutation of the constitutional promise of free expression into a conditional privilege, a reality where the newsroom has been fundamentally restructured from a site of editorial independence into a compliant transmission belt for state narratives. This is not a system designed for journalistic accountability but a calculated ecosystem of information warfare deployed against the public sphere, one that ensures the manufacturing of consent through the legal, financial, and physical annihilation of dissent.

The path forward demands a comprehensive and interconnected reform agenda that matches the sophistication of the coercive architecture it seeks to dismantle. Piecemeal amendments to individual statutes will prove futile because the system derives its potency not from any single component but from the synergistic interplay of all three. Legislative reform must simultaneously redefine PEMRA's mandate to eliminate its inherent conflict of interest and replace its undefined content restrictions with precise, transparent, and judicially reviewable standards, repeal PECA's criminal provisions against speech and restore the burden of proof to the state, and enact statutory protections for journalistic sources and whistleblowers that cannot be overridden by national security invocations. Judicial institutions, particularly the superior courts, must abandon their deferential posture toward executive security claims and develop a rigorous, evidence-based jurisprudence that treats the chilling effect on press freedom as a cognizable constitutional harm requiring strict proportionality analysis. Most fundamentally, the culture of impunity that enables enforced disappearances and violence against journalists must be shattered through independent, transparent investigations with meaningful accountability for perpetrators at every level of the state apparatus. Without this multidimensional approach, the regulatory ecosystem will continue to manufacture a compliant public sphere, hollowing out the democratic function of the fourth estate and ensuring that Pakistani citizens remain systematically deprived of the information necessary for meaningful democratic participation. The choice confronting Pakistan is stark and consequential, between a coercive information state that purchases short-term narrative control at the cost of long-term institutional legitimacy and a genuinely democratic order where the press fulfills its constitutional role as a watchdog rather than a lapdog of power.

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