

JOURNALISM IN AZAD JAMMU & KASHMIR

STATE OF MEDIA FREEDOMS,
ACCESS TO INFORMATION AND
SAFETY OF JOURNALISTS AND
OTHER MEDIA PROFESSIONALS
IN AZAD JAMMU & KASHMIR >
THE WAY FORWARD

Pakistan

Adnan Rehmat & Iqbal Khattak



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Executive Summary

This report presents a comprehensive examination of the challenges faced by journalists and media professionals in the Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) region of Pakistan. With a focus on censorship, harassment, legal barriers, and systemic shortcomings, the report highlights the precarious state of media freedoms in the region, drawing on extensive interviews, focus group discussions, and desk research conducted by Freedom Network in October-November 2024.

Rise of native voices and platforms:

AJK's media landscape is uniquely influenced by its geopolitical and socio-cultural context. Over the years, the region has transitioned from reliance on mainstream Pakistani national outlets to the rise of local voices through native print and digital platforms. Despite a literacy rate of 74%, higher than Pakistan's national average, the region's media faces severe limitations, including financial constraints, bureaucratic controls, and safety concerns. While native digital platforms are becoming a dominant force in the local media landscape, traditional media continues to grapple with outdated narrative practices and declining relevance at odds with public interest.

Barriers to viability:

The claim of unrestricted media freedom in AJK is undermined by systemic and structural barriers. While political leaders assert that freedom of expression is upheld, the reality reflects a different picture. Media owners are required to obtain security clearances and no-objection certificates (NOCs) to practice, and they are heavily dependent on government advertisements, which throws up viability challenges. The absence of a Right to Information (RTI) law for AJK further restricts journalists, forcing them to rely on unofficial and at times unreliable sources for information.

Risky expressions:

Threats to free speech in AJK emanate from multiple sources, including government authorities, caste-based power structures, extremist groups, and organized crime. Journalists often face pressure from influential figures, including government agencies, business elites, and local mafias. The rise of

native digital journalism has introduced new risks, with many digital journalists operating without editorial guidance and taking unnecessary risks. Organized crime and extremist groups also pose significant threats, as journalists reporting on sensitive issues risk attacks, intimidation, and defamation accusations.

Little money:

The service structure for journalists in AJK is marked by low wages, job insecurity, and a lack of professional standards. Many journalists are unpaid or underpaid, and some are forced to rely on their outlets to pressure advertisers for revenue. The absence of industry regulations further exacerbates the precarious working conditions, with few protections for journalists who report on controversial topics.

Gender imbalance and risks:

The representation of women in AJK's journalism sector is minimal, with only five female journalists among 85 press club members at Muzaffarabad Press Club. Cultural stigma, harassment, and character assassination discourage women from pursuing journalism as a career. Women journalists often face significant restrictions on the scope of their reporting and are subjected to innuendos and threats, further highlighting the systemic gender disparities in the media landscape.

Threat matrix:

The safety of journalists in AJK is a critical concern, compounded by the lack of institutional safeguards and legal frameworks. While the government claims to prioritize citizen safety, no specific measures are in place to address the risks faced by journalists. Formal protective laws for journalists – like those in Sindh and at the federal level – are absent, and journalists are often left to navigate hostile environments without support. This lack of security is reflected in incidents of harassment, threats, and attacks on media professionals.

Censorship:

Censorship in AJK manifests in various forms, including state-imposed restrictions, self-censorship, and digital silencing. The government has expanded the legal definition of “community” to include itself, enabling the prosecution of journalists under laws that criminalize criticism of government institutions. Media outlets critical of the government have faced closures, while others are pressured into compliance through denial of advertisements. Social media platforms also contribute to censorship, with algorithms reportedly favouring Indian narratives and silencing Kashmiri voices.

Criminalized criticism:

The legal environment in AJK is fraught with challenges, as journalists often face lawsuits and legislative amendments aimed at suppressing dissent. The amendment of colonial-era laws, such as Section 505 of the Penal Code, has further restricted free speech by criminalizing criticism of political leaders and institutions. Cases of defamation and terrorism are frequently used to intimidate journalists, creating a chilling effect on reporting.

Challenges to public interest journalism: Journalists in AJK face a range of personal and professional threats, including harassment, intimidation, and administrative dismissals. These challenges often stem from their reporting on sensitive issues, such as corruption, caste dynamics, or government policies. Journalists have recounted instances of threats to their families, physical attacks, and forced relocations. In extreme cases, journalists have been arrested or disappeared temporarily, only to be released after facing significant trauma. AJK-based journalists seeking information through RTI requests are often ignored, further impeding their ability to hold power to account.

Despite these challenges, journalists in AJK continue to resist through collective action and solidarity. Press clubs and journalist associations have played a crucial role in confronting threats and advocating for greater protections. However, press clubs and media institutions, traditionally seen as bastions of support for journalists, have been paralyzed by litigation and bureaucratic interference. The lack of institutional support from Pakistan-based media development organizations and support for advocacy for systemic reforms leaves journalists vulnerable, highlighting the urgent need for comprehensive measures to safeguard press freedom and ensure the sustainability of the media industry in AJK.

Chapter 2

Introduction

The media landscape in the Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) region of Pakistan is shaped by its unique geopolitical and socio-cultural context, presenting both opportunities and challenges for freedom of expression and journalistic practice. Over the years, the region's native media has evolved from a reliance on mainstream Pakistani media outlets to a growing focus on local voices, reflected in the development of both print and digital platforms. However, this progress has not been without hurdles. Journalists in AJK navigate a treacherous environment marked by censorship, financial constraints, safety risks, and systemic challenges, all of which undermine the role of the media as a watchdog and platform for diverse perspectives.

This report by Freedom Network examines the state of media in AJK, focusing on the systemic challenges that hinder press freedom and the working conditions of journalists in both rural and urban areas of the region. It is part of a series of special reports aimed at understanding and addressing the barriers to freedom of expression and the safety of journalists in Pakistan's provinces and various other territories.



MUZAFFARABAD: A view of Muzaffarabad Press Club. Photo by Freedom Network

Despite a literacy rate higher than the national average, AJK's media ecosystem remains constrained by limited resources, financial dependencies, and external pressures. The emergence of digital platforms offers new opportunities for local storytelling, yet traditional media continues to struggle under the weight of outdated practices and a lack of professional standards. Safety and security remain critical concerns, as journalists face harassment, intimidation, and even legal action for reporting on sensitive issues.

While AJK's government claims to uphold freedom of speech, structural barriers—including bureaucratic hurdles, the absence of right-to-information laws, and the politicization of press institutions—paint a more complex picture. The challenges are further exacerbated by societal power dynamics, with caste affiliations and local elites influencing media narratives and journalistic independence.

The report aims to highlight the issues faced by journalists in AJK, including the systemic and institutional barriers that limit press freedom. It also delves into the lived experiences of journalists, their struggle for professional security, and the broader impact of these challenges on media sustainability in the region. The findings underscore the need for comprehensive reforms to protect journalists, promote press freedom, and ensure that AJK's media landscape evolves into a robust and independent platform for public discourse.

2.1 Methodology

The Freedom Network collected the data for this report through desk research as well as focus group discussions (FGDs) with AJK media practitioners and other stakeholders as well as key informant interviews (KIIs) in October-November 2024.

2.2 Governance Structure in AJK

Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) emerged as a distinct administrative region on October 24, 1947, following its liberation from the rule of the Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir. Initially functioning as a war council aimed at liberating the entire territory of Jammu and Kashmir, AJK has evolved into a quasi-state entity with its own President, Prime Minister, cabinet, legislature, and judiciary. Despite these developments, AJK's governance remains constrained due to its unique status under international law and its ambiguous constitutional relationship with Pakistan. The region's governance structure reflects its contested status within the broader Kashmir conflict and remains shaped by

the political and constitutional dynamics of both Pakistan and international frameworks.

AJK occupies a peculiar position in both international and domestic law. It is recognized as a “local authority” by United Nations (UN) resolutions and lacks sovereign statehood as defined by international legal standards such as the Montevideo Convention. The AJK Interim Constitution of 1974 governs the region, but its interim nature underscores the unresolved status of the Kashmir conflict. Under this framework, AJK is not a constitutional part of Pakistan, yet its governance is significantly influenced by Pakistan’s institutions. Initially, governance in AJK was centralized, with limited autonomy granted to its institutions. The executive power was divided among the Azad Government of the State of Jammu and Kashmir, the AJK Council, and the Government of Pakistan. The AJK Council, dominated by Pakistan, exercised legislative and executive control over 52 key subjects, leaving limited scope for AJK’s legislature and government to operate independently.

The 18th Amendment to the Constitution of Pakistan, enacted in 2010, marked a significant shift in Pakistan’s federal structure. It devolved powers to the provinces, enhancing provincial autonomy and reducing the central government’s control. The amendment also abolished the concurrent legislative list, granting exclusive legislative authority to the provinces on all matters not listed in the federal legislative list. However, these reforms had minimal impact on AJK. Despite demands for similar devolution of powers, AJK’s governance remained centralized, with most key subjects controlled by Pakistan. The 18th Amendment highlighted the stark contrast between the constitutional empowerment of Pakistan’s provinces and the limited autonomy of AJK, fueling demands for governance reforms within the region.

In 2018, the 13th Constitutional Amendment was introduced in the AJK Interim Constitution, 1974. This amendment sought to realign the distribution of powers between AJK and Pakistan. The AJK Council was stripped of its legislative, executive, and financial powers, reducing its role to that of a coordinating body. The amendment granted AJK the authority to legislate on 22 subjects with Pakistan’s prior approval and allowed it to collect taxes, providing a degree of fiscal autonomy. While the 13th Amendment marked a step toward decentralization, it failed to achieve the level of autonomy envisioned under the 18th Amendment in Pakistan. The Government of Pakistan retained exclusive control over 32 subjects, including foreign affairs, defense, currency, and responsibilities under UN resolutions. Critics argue that the amendment did not significantly empower AJK’s legislature or judiciary, leaving its governance structure largely centralized.

AJK's governance faces several challenges stemming from its constitutional limitations and ambiguous status. Key issues include a lack of provincial autonomy, as AJK lacks the independence to legislate and govern in most areas. The judiciary in AJK is not as independent as Pakistan's superior courts, with judges being appointed by the executive, compromising impartiality and the rule of law. The absence of local government elections has deprived citizens of grassroots representation and participation in governance. Political and administrative centralization further hinders the development of democratic governance in AJK. Additionally, the unresolved status of the Kashmir conflict keeps the region in a state of constitutional limbo, restricting long-term governance reforms.

The constitutional development in Pakistan serves as a benchmark for evaluating governance in AJK. The 18th Amendment empowered Pakistan's provinces through measures such as provincial control over resources, devolution of executive powers, and enhanced legislative authority. In contrast, AJK's governance remains centralized, with most critical powers vested in Pakistan. This disparity highlights the need for constitutional reforms in AJK to align its governance structure with democratic principles and federalism.

The governance structure of AJK reflects the complexities of its interim status within the broader Kashmir conflict. While the region has developed institutional frameworks resembling a state, its governance remains constrained by constitutional and legal limitations. The 13th Amendment brought incremental changes, but significant reforms are needed to align AJK's governance with democratic principles and the aspirations of its people. Constitutional empowerment and devolution of powers in AJK would not only improve governance but also strengthen Pakistan's position on the Kashmir issue in international forums. Achieving these reforms requires political will, consensus, and a recognition of AJK's unique challenges and potential within the framework of the unresolved Kashmir conflict.

2.3: The State of Media in AJK

Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) offers a unique and complex media environment influenced heavily by its geopolitical context. The region's media has evolved from reliance on mainstream Pakistani media outlets to a growing emphasis on local voices, both in print and digital forms. Despite this progress, media professionals face challenges related to censorship, limited resources, and security risks. Native digital platforms are becoming more dominant, though traditional media retains significant influence.

Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK), spanning 5,134 square miles, represents a unique yet underrepresented media landscape in Pakistan. The region's population, estimated between 2.7 million (according to Pakistan's 2023 census survey) and 4.3 million (as per AJK government data), resides largely in rural areas (88%), with only 12% in urban centres. Despite a high literacy rate of 74%, higher than Pakistan's national average, the region's media struggles with limited resources, financial constraints, and significant reliance on external platforms.

"Most AJK newspapers are published in Rawalpindi-Islamabad. Editors do visit their hometowns but then return here. They take information from AJK reporters," remarked Adeel Bashir, a Kashmiri journalist working as an anchorperson with Rose News TV channel in Islamabad. Local newspapers began to gain prominence in the 1990s, a shift from the dominance of mainstream Pakistani dailies in earlier decades. Today, around 50 native newspapers are actively published from AJK, including dailies, weeklies, and fortnightlies. However, their relevance is diminishing.

"The real total circulation of newspapers may not be more than 10,000 in AJK whereas in the PID [Public Information Department] records, the number of newspapers is in hundreds of thousands," noted Sardar Naeem Chughtai, a journalist with GNN News TV channel based in Muzaffarabad. Many local publications struggle to compete with digital platforms, especially as their content often mirrors official press releases, leading to declining readership. "Who will read newspapers if they publish PID press releases alone?" questioned Asif Raza Mir, a reporter at Express News TV channel.

Digital media is rapidly reshaping the journalistic landscape in AJK. According to Abrar Haider, the chief editor of *Jehan Kashmir daily*, "Digital media is replacing both print and electronic journalism very fast. Instead of in their thousands, now newspapers are distributed in only their hundreds." Platforms like Facebook and YouTube are not only disseminating news but also driving discussions on local issues that often go ignored by mainstream media.

"Social media has become critical, particularly during movements like the year-long Joint Action Committee protests, which mainstream media ignored. Activists relied on social media to convey their message," explained Sardar Shaukat, the editor of Islamabad Today.

However, resources for local journalists remain sparse. Kashif Mir, the manager editor at State Views, highlighted that "There are five digital media channels

that are being run locally. International media like BBC and Al Jazeera have closed down their setups and fired their stringers.”



ISLAMABAD: Kashif Mir, the manager editor at *State Views* (in center) highlighting the digital media channels and the media environment – Photo Freedom Network

AJK’s media environment suffers from limited attention from Pakistan’s national outlets. “Big events happening in AJK get coverage. However, on day-to-day affairs, AJK does not get much space in national media. Our issues are not discussed in the same manner,” lamented Asif Raza Mir. This lack of sustained attention underscores the need for dedicated native television channels to bridge the gap between local realities and broader awareness.

The financial constraints facing the media are immense. “[Daily] Jammu Kashmir, the most popular newspaper in the state, is facing monthly losses of millions of rupees due to denial of advertisements from the government. How can journalism sustain in such a situation?” asked Sehrish Qureshi, a journalist for digital platform *Independent Urdu*. The absence of institutional support further exacerbates the problem. As Sardar Naeem Chughtai pointed out, “There is no desk available in AJK where graduates from the [university] journalism department can work as interns and learn journalism.”

Despite these challenges, AJK-based journalists remain committed to highlighting issues of their region. The Muzaffarabad Press Club, with its 85 members, serves as a hub for local media professionals, though only two women are part of the membership – a reflection of the gender disparity within the field.



ISLAMABAD: Sehrish Quresh (L), journalist for digital platform Independent Urdu sharing the financial constraints of the media- Photo: Freedom Network

State of Media Freedoms in Kashmir

The state of media freedom in Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) presents a complex and often contradictory picture. While some stakeholders claim there are no overt restrictions on freedom of speech, systemic challenges – such as bureaucratic hurdles, government control, and the absence of legal frameworks like the Right to Information (RTI) law – restrict journalists from functioning independently. Compounded by a lack of safety mechanisms and resources, the media in AJK struggles to address local issues comprehensively and maintain its integrity.

“I can’t see any restriction to freedom of speech in AJK. People express all kinds of views here, including political ones,” stated Shah Ghulam Qadir, President of AJK chapter of the Pakistan Muslim League-N. However, this optimism is not shared universally, as structural and administrative challenges continue to hamper true media freedom.

According to Adeel Bashir, the anchorperson at *Rose News* TV channel, “In order to publish a newspaper, one has to go through security clearance and get requisite NOCs. Media owners often try to please government authorities to secure advertisements, and when they don’t, their advertisements can be stopped.” This creates a dependency that limits the press’s ability to operate independently.

The government has allocated some 70 million rupees for media, which they use to control both legacy and digital platforms. We have been facing difficulties for the last two years,” lamented Kashif Mir, the manager editor at *State Views*. He further highlighted the absence of a Right to Information (RTI) law in AJK: “If such a law is passed, it will make journalists’ work easier. Currently, it can take six months to access a complete copy of the budget. In such situations, we [are constrained to] rely on sources.”



ISLAMABAD: Kashmir-based journalists take part in focal group discussion personal stories about journalism in their areas. Photo by Freedom Network

The overarching control of AJK media by external influences was noted by Arif Urfi of Geo News channel, who commented, “Media in AJK is controlled from Islamabad. This is the kind of freedom we have.”

A lack of forums where journalists can report safety concerns further exacerbates their challenges. “There is no forum available to journalists where they can report challenges to their safety,” said Saima Ashraf, a news anchor at *Radio Pakistan*. This gap leaves media professionals vulnerable to threats and harassment.

Adding to the structural issues, Asif Raza Mir, the reporter at Express News, highlighted conflicts within the journalist community: “The union of newspaper owners is called Azad Kashmir Newspaper Society [AKNS]. Most members of AKNS are also members of the press club and journalists’ union. It blurs the difference between the employer and employee and makes our work difficult.” He also emphasized the need for unity: “Instead of one, there are two unions of journalists – the Azad Kashmir Union of Journalists [AKUJ] and the Central Union of Journalists [CUJ]. We need one platform.”



MUZAFFARABAD: Journalists of AJK sharing the state of media freedom. Photo by Freedom Network

A significant limitation of media in AJK is its inability in the face of constraints to effectively portray the region's real issues. Tariq Saeed, a member of the AJK Council from the Pakistan People's Party, observed, "Media is failing to portray the real issues of AJK. Unfortunately, they don't have enough resources to access various areas in our difficult mountainous terrain, and I feel they don't have the requisite training as well."

3.1 Threat Actors to Free Speech in AJK

Journalists in Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) navigate a challenging environment where threats to free speech emerge from various sources, including societal structures, governmental authorities, and non-state actors. Despite claims of freedom, the reality on the ground is far more nuanced, with systemic and localized challenges posing significant barriers to journalistic integrity and safety.

"The kind of freedom that is available to journalists in AJK is not available to journalists in Pakistan or the world," claimed Shah Ghulam Qadir, President of PML-N, AJK. However, this statement is contradicted by the lived experiences of journalists like Kashif Mir, the manager editor at *State Views*, who explained, "We feel afraid of all powerful people. Everyone who enjoys authority, from the highest to the lowest levels, poses a threat. AJK is a small area with 4-5 dominant *brotheries* [caste groups]. Everything is determined based on caste affiliation, and news reporting is often judged on these lines, creating strong reactions from caste communities."

Threats to free speech in AJK range from governmental interference to intimidation by powerful individuals and organizations. “From government to government, threats to media vary,” noted journalist Sehrish Qureshi. The rise of digital journalism has introduced new risks. According to Qureshi, “Digital journalism has also created a threat to free speech due to a lack of editorial guidance. Digital journalists often ignore their own safety and take unnecessary risks.”

For some journalists, safety concerns are tied directly to extremist groups and mafias. Arif Urfi, a journalist with *Geo News* TV channel, shared a harrowing experience: “It is hard for me to set up an office because extremist organizations attacked my office, claiming that some anchor on my channel had committed blasphemy in their opinion. I can’t open it any longer.” Similarly, Asif Raza Mir, a reporter at *Express News*, highlighted threats from organized crime: “There are mafias belonging to various businesses, including timber and tobacco. If you report on them, you can face various threats.” He added, “Mafias, elites, tribes, and government functionaries are the main threat actors for journalists in the region. Amid these challenges, journalistic standards have also come under scrutiny. Naeem Tahir, a journalist from Muzaffarabad, noted, “In 11 years of my career, no one has threatened me. Unfortunately, our journalistic standards are so low that we are like medical quacks who have learned basic skills but aren’t experts in their professions.”

3.2 Poor Service Structure for Media Practitioners in AJK Media

The service structure for journalists in Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) is marked by low wages, inconsistent payments, and a lack of professional standards. These challenges have resulted in a compromised media environment, impacting both the quality of journalism and the livelihoods of those in the profession.

“AJK-based reporters are not well-paid, and many are not paid at all. Their professionalism is compromised as a result, and they do not report many issues at all,” explained Adeel Bashir, the anchorperson at *Rose News*. He added, “Media owners use their newspapers to put pressure on those from whom they need advertisements and use reporters for this purpose. Due to this, local media is not very effective.”

The lack of industrial development in the region further exacerbates the problem. Syed Amir, a reporter for *State Views*, noted, “Since there is not much

industry in AJK, the national media houses and channels don't generate much revenue here, and as a result, they don't pay journalists as they do in the rest of the country. They normally pay one journalist only, who is supposed to cover ten districts."

"Media in AJK is totally dependent on the Press Information Department for its revenue," remarked another contributor. Asif Raza Mir, a reporter for *Express News*, highlighted a paradox, stating, "Many mainstream Pakistani newspapers get hefty advertisements from the AJK government. However, they fail to compensate native journalists within the region."

The absence of payment criteria for journalists is a critical issue. Sardar Naeem Chughtai of GNN News TV channel explained, "The minimum wage in AJK is Rs 39,000. We demand that journalists should at least get the minimum pay according to the labour laws. But journalists don't even get this basic wage. There are only a small number of TV channels that pay their staff."

In addition to low wages, job security is virtually non-existent. Asif Raza Mir shared, "You report a story, and you may be asked to leave for it without explaining to you why you are being fired."

3.3 Gender Inequity in Journalism in AJK

The state of gender representation in journalism in Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) is starkly imbalanced, reflecting broader challenges faced by women in the media industry. With only a handful of women journalists actively participating, their voices and perspectives remain underrepresented, leaving crucial gender-related reporting largely unaddressed.

"There are only five women journalists in AJK out of 85 members. Only two have been granted membership of the Press Club," highlighted one participant. Such limited representation indicates a systemic issue in inclusivity within the profession. Sehrish Qureshi from Independent Urdu media platform further emphasized, "The fact that journalists are poorly paid or not paid at all is a major reason for women not joining journalism. If 50% of the population is excluded from journalism, it is bound to be biased."

Despite these challenges, women have occasionally broken barriers. Notably, one woman has even served as the president of a press club. However, these instances are rare and often overshadowed by persistent issues.

The profession poses significant risks for women journalists, including harassment and character assassination. One woman journalist who did not want her name shared, said, “Women journalists may face the issue of online harassment and character assassination. I think women should not join this profession.”

Saima Ashraf, a news anchor for Radio Pakistan, recounted her experience: “All journalists face problems, but women have to restrict themselves reporting to a small menu [of topics]. She has to do the kind of reporting that doesn’t ruffle any feathers. I did a story on a school in 2021. The teachers at that school were absent. They had hired a proxy teacher for a small payment. After my story was published, the teachers’ families threatened me indirectly.”



MUZAFFARABAD: Nosheen Khwaja from *Kashmir Times* (first right from RIGHT) on difficulties of Women journalists in AJK media. Photo by Freedom Network

Cultural stigma further exacerbates the difficulties women face in journalism. Nosheen Khwaja from *Kashmir Times* remarked, “Women’s character assassination is done, and they are linked to other men based on mere assumptions. At times, innuendos are made even when a woman journalist visits someone for an interview.”

The cumulative impact of such barriers – harassment, safety concerns, and a lack of institutional support – discourages many women from entering the field, resulting in a male-dominated media landscape. Addressing these challenges is crucial to ensuring a more equitable and balanced representation in AJK’s journalism sector.

The State of Safety of Journalists in AJK

The safety and protection of journalists and other media practitioners in Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) remain critical issues, reflecting both systemic shortcomings and the broader challenges of working in volatile environments. While the government acknowledges its role, practical measures for ensuring the safety of media professionals are limited.

Shah Ghulam Qadir, the president of PML-N AJK, remarked, “Safety of all citizens is the responsibility of the government. I don’t think there is a need to make any distinction in this regard. AJK has an excellent policing system. However, if need arises and the press council provides guidance, legislation for the safety of journalists can be carried out.” Despite these assurances, the lack of specific legislative frameworks addressing journalist safety underscores the need for urgent policy action.

The absence of robust protective mechanisms is a glaring concern. Sehrish Qureshi from Independent Urdu observed, “I haven’t seen any journalist using protective gear while reporting from Kashmir.” Furthermore, there is no legislation restricting criticism of the government, which Shah Ghulam Qadir emphasized as a policy they do not support. However, the absence of laws tailored to journalists’ safety leaves them vulnerable.

Asif Raza Mir, a reporter for Express News, highlighted, “Journalists need an environment in which they could work peacefully.” He further stressed, “We badly need a law for the safety of journalists. Only after such a law is passed should defamation laws be legislated. [In the meanwhile], the national law [on safety of journalists] could be adopted in the [AJK] state, just the way many other national laws have been adopted.”

Journalists in AJK face significant risks in their line of work, compounded by a lack of institutional safeguards and access to resources. A comprehensive legal framework that addresses their safety and provides recourse against defamation is crucial to fostering a more secure working environment.

4.1 Extreme Forms of Censorship in AJK

Media freedom in Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) is a complex landscape marked by state-imposed controls, self-censorship, and external pressures from powerful individuals and institutions. While the AJK government claims to promote freedom of expression, systemic barriers and practices indicate otherwise.

Mazhar Saeed, the state information minister of AJK, stated, “The AJK government has adopted a policy that there will be no restriction on speaking the truth because where there is restriction on freedom of expressions, such societies can’t grow morally, politically, or economically.” Despite this assertion, actions on the ground reveal significant limitations to journalistic freedoms.

Adeel Bashir, the anchorperson of Rose News, pointed out that definitions within legislation have been expanded to include the government and local administration in the “community.” This means, as Kashif Mir, Manager Editor of State Views, explained, “This law essentially says that you can be imprisoned for seven years if you ridiculed the community.” The inclusion of government figures in these protections leaves journalists vulnerable to legal action for criticism.



ISLAMABAD: Kashmir based journalists brainstorming Censorship in Media journalists in AJK. Photo by Freedom Network

The government’s control over media has extended to shutting down critical outlets. Kashif Mir recounted, “In 2017, we started and registered a digital

channel named State Views. The current government banned it as soon as it came into power because we were part of the last government, and the former prime minister was our partner before he was elected.” Similarly, Asif Raza Mir, a reporter for Express News, noted, “Advertisements for three newspapers in AJK have been suspended by the government because they were criticizing the government.”

Censorship is compounded by local power dynamics. Journalists associated with influential tribes or castes often escape consequences, while those from marginalized groups face immense pressure. As Asif Raza Mir explained, “If a journalist belonging to a small tribe reports, he will face pressure in his own home and area.”

Social media platforms pose additional challenges, particularly for Kashmiri voices. Sehrish Qureshi observed, “There is a digital form of censorship that is imposed on us from the [international] social media platforms. These platforms pay a lot of attention to the [perspectives of the] Indian government, and their algorithms silence the voices of the Kashmiri journalists and citizens.”

Press freedom in AJK is also undermined by the politicization of press clubs and institutional barriers. Arif Urfi from Geo News channel highlighted, “There was one press club that was free, and it is now been mired in litigation. Press clubs are regulated by the Press Foundation, and it has also been litigated against.”

Historically, Pakistan’s intelligence agencies exercised significant control over the media narrative. Zulfikar Ali, a journalist for *The Wayard*, noted, “Following the peace process between Pakistan and India in 2003, as well as the aftermath of the [2005] earthquake, this grip has slowly but noticeably weakened. However, control remains regarding Kashmir and security issues.” He further highlighted that journalists continue to impose self-censorship on topics such as the plight of nearly 43,000 Kashmiri refugees living in camps since 1990.

The interplay of state control, local power dynamics, and external censorship creates an environment where journalistic freedom is heavily compromised, limiting the media’s role in fostering accountability and transparency.

4.2 Legal Cases against Journalists and Legislative Challenges in AJK

The legal framework in Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) has increasingly been weaponized to stifle dissent and suppress journalistic freedom. While the

region's journalists strive to report on critical issues, they are often met with lawsuits, legal amendments, and institutional barriers.

Journalists in AJK frequently face legal action as a tool of intimidation. Kashif Mir, the manager editor of State Views, shared, "False cases were registered against me, Amir Mahbub, the editor of *Jammu Kashmir* newspaper, and other journalists for reporting the movement led by the Awami Action Committee. These were cases of treason and terrorism." Despite these charges, the government was reluctant to share official copies of the FIRs. "We had to obtain the FIRs unofficially," he added, noting that such actions are meant to make examples of critical journalists.

In May 2024, during protests organized by the Jammu Kashmir Joint Awami Action Committee (JAAC), cases were registered against journalists who reported on the events. Sehrish Qureshi from Independent Urdu observed, "The situation of freedom of media [in AJK] is worsening. Journalists continued reporting despite the pressure of these cases."

Legal reforms have also been leveraged to restrict freedom of speech. Amendments to Section 505 of the colonial-era Penal Code, initially introduced in 1860, now criminalize criticism of political leaders and government institutions. The amended law imposes penalties of up to seven years in prison and fines, expanding the definition of "community" to include government officials. Zulfiqar Ali, a journalist from *The Wayard*, explained, "This effectively grants them immunity from criticism while criminalizing legitimate dissent." The introduction of the Defamation Act in December 2023 further escalated concerns. While public backlash delayed its enactment, its intent to curb dissent was clear. The proposed act mirrors earlier attempts by the Pakistan People's Party government in AJK 2015 to introduce similar legislation, which was abandoned due to public opposition.

The institutional barriers to journalism are equally troubling. Press clubs, traditionally spaces of support for journalists, have been paralyzed by litigation. Arif Urfi from Geo News noted, "The accounts of the Press Club have been frozen, and journalists receive no welfare support when they fall sick."

Requests for information under the Right to Information (RTI) framework are often ignored. Nasreen Sheikh, a reporter for Daily Siasat, remarked, "When we file an RTI, no one bothers to respond."

The consistent use of litigation and legislative amendments has had a chilling effect on journalism in AJK. Journalists are dissuaded from pursuing critical

stories, fearing legal repercussions or professional ostracism. This environment not only undermines the role of the press as a watchdog but also deprives the public of vital information about governance, corruption, and social issues.

The legal environment in AJK, shaped by colonial laws and modern amendments, underscores the need for urgent reforms to protect journalistic freedoms and ensure accountability in governance.

4.3 Harassment, Intimidation, and Dismissals

Journalists in Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) often face significant threats, intimidation, and administrative hurdles in response to their reporting. These challenges range from personal harassment to professional dismissals, creating a hostile environment for media practitioners.

Arif Urfi of *Geo News* shared harrowing accounts of targeted threats, including tampering with his car's tie-rod and cutting its pipe. "In one academic year, my children had to change schools thrice. They were expelled due to accusations against me of involvement in anti-state activities," he explained. The hostility forced him to relocate his children to another city for their education. He continues to face contempt of court charges related to his reporting.

He also recounted an incident where someone attempted to break into his home, only to be released by the police the same evening. "The officer told me, 'He has been taken by the people whose man he was,'" he added. His wife was also transferred out of AJK and has not received her salary for 22 months. The pressure on journalists often extends to their professional lives. Nasreen Sheikh of *Daily Siasat* revealed, "I was once threatened and forced to deny my own news. There was no recourse available to me, and I now face a defamation case."

Arifa Mehmood of *Domel News Digital* added, "I was threatened because I reported against someone closely associated with the director of an important institution." She also highlighted the lack of cooperation from officials, recounting her struggles to obtain information for commissioned articles in Muzaffarabad.

The systemic intimidation of journalists often involves arrests and legal repercussions. Naeem Tahir, a journalist from Muzaffarabad, recalled being arrested in 2009 for supporting a crime reporter who was beaten by the police. In some cases, journalists have disappeared, only to be released later without

harm, while police cases are filed against them. Zulfikar Ali of *The Wayard* noted, “Local government ministers have resorted to administrative tactics against journalists who produce critical stories about them.”

Despite these challenges, journalists continue to resist through collective action. Arif Urfi explained, “When I received a threatening letter, members of the press club and the TV Journalists Association joined me. We met with the administration, protested, and confronted them.”

However, even such solidarity often falls short of resolving the systemic issues. The environment remains fraught with risks, highlighting the urgent need for structural reforms to protect journalists in AJK.

The Way Forward: Media Development Roadmap for AJK – Recommendations

Addressing the challenges outlined in this report is crucial for the development of a functional and professional media sector in AJK, and a sustainable media landscape in the region. The focused group discussions and key informant interviews conducted for this report in the region generated the following key recommendations for media development in AJK:

1. **Institutional support for AJK journalists:** Empower and capacitate journalists in AJK through long-term and continuous institutional support from media development groups.
2. **Strengthen advocacy for media freedoms in AJK:** Support journalists and media associations such as press clubs and journalists' unions in AJK with trainings and resources on campaigning around freedom of expression within the region.
3. **Support for safety of AJK journalists:** Advocating for formal legal and legislative framework in AJK on safety of journalists as legislated in the federal and Sindh provincial laws on safety of journalists.
4. **Strengthening RTI regime and practise in AJK:** Advocating for formal legal and legislative framework in AJK on access to information as enshrined in the federal and provincial RTI laws and practices for an enabling access to information regime and orienting and resourcing local media and allied stakeholders in good RTI practices.
5. **Gender sensitization of media:** Promoting gender affirmative measures in aid of women media practitioners based in AJK with capacity building and resources to further professionalize their work and conducting gender sensitization drives within the native media industry to build support for greater equity of women in media.

6. **Supporting digital media:** Provide capacity building and technical resources for AJK-based native independent digital media platforms and their linkages with national and international counterparts for best practices and knowledge resources.
7. **Strengthen public interest journalism through media-civil society interfacing:** Supporting a formalized interface among native media, civil society and academia to foster professional collaboration toward creating a more informed society; to strengthen public interest journalism and support democratic processes in AJK.
8. **Supporting linkages between native AJK media and their mainstream Pakistani counterparts:** Strengthen the linkages between native media of AJK and the mainstream Pakistani media industry to foster learning and collaboration.
9. **Strengthen journalism education:** Support institutions such as local universities and media associations to improve journalism curricula and relevant training courses to promote media professionalism.
10. **Networking AJK media with mainstream Pakistani media:** Helping press clubs and journalists' unions in AJK network with their counterparts in the rest of Pakistan, especially Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists and key press clubs such as in Islamabad where there is a large community of AJK-origin journalists.

ABOUT FREEDOM NETWORK

Freedom Network is Islamabad-based independent media watchdog and development sector research, advocacy and training organization. It was established in 2013.

In 2017, Freedom Network was awarded the prestigious French Republic's "Human Rights Prize" for "its efforts for safety and protection of journalists and promotion of freedom of expression."

OUR MISSION:

To protect civil liberties, including freedom of expression and access to information, and promote an informed society that sees media as a key partner in a democratic and pluralist Pakistan.