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Pakistan

Forced disappearances will not silence us

- IV Online magazine - 2017 - IV504 - January 2017 -

Publication date: Saturday 21 January 2017

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In the first two weeks of 2017, five activists have reportedly gone missing in Pakistan. Others have taken to social media to share what they referred to as failed abduction attempts. Chat groups, email lists, and social media are abuzz with multiple reports of as many as nine activists and citizen journalists who have reportedly gone "missing". There is one common thread that haunts the families and the larger civil rights community in Pakistan: uncertainty.

No groups have taken responsibility for abducting them. There's been no response from the authorities on the whereabouts of these individuals and no admission that they may be under arrest. The interior ministry has so far said that they're looking into the issue.

The implication that they've been taken by a security agency stems from the testimonies of their families that are far too familiar. Men in plain clothes picking up individuals from their home and taking them away in an unmarked car. At least two of those missing were taken from their homes.

Salman Haider: Professor at Fatima Jinnah Women University, active in Awami Workers Party, a leftist socialist party who was very critical of state policies, editor at Tanqeed - an independent e-zine critical of state policies - and a poet. Ahmed Waqas Goraya, Asim Saeed - both visiting from abroad - and Ahmed Raza Naseer were active political commentators online. Samar Abbas is the president of Civil Progressive Alliance Pakistan - working on minority rights especially the targeted killing of Shia Muslims in Pakistan.

The one thing common between the missing five was their critical approach to state policies, the rise of extremism, and the military's overreaching on matters outside its ambit. Their abduction sends a strong message that the state is willing to bypass the constitution, and overlook the legal and constitutional rights of every citizen to critique and debate state's affairs, in order to threaten, intimidate, and silence citizens.

A history of forced disappearances

Pakistan consistently ranks very low for press freedom, ranking 147 in the 2016 World Press Freedom Index, and "Not Free" in the Freedom of the Press 2016 rankings by Freedom House. This is largely due to several cases of killing of journalists with impunity.

Both the reports point to threats to journalists, not only from extremist militant organisations, but also the powerful military and its associated intelligence agencies. Journalists covering issues and activists criticising state policies considered sensitive by the military often come under scrutiny, are forcibly disappeared, or killed.

These issues include fighting in the Balochistan province - where the state alleges Indian involvement, investigating links between the military and "extremist" organisations and lately, criticising projects under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) worth a total of \$51.5bn.

Despite the fact that forced disappearances have been a pressing issue in Pakistan, the number of people who have been abducted, and their whereabouts, is still not known and widely disputed. In 2015, the Supreme Court of

Pakistan issued an order demanding that the authorities produce a report on the number of missing people in Pakistan.

While the Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances (CIED) said that it has received 1,265 cases as of Dec 31, 2014, the Defence of Human Rights (DHR) - a civil society organisation working with the families of those missing - claims that the total number of cases of missing persons is 5,149 and 252 of them surfaced in 2014 alone.

In its final report last year, the CIED, headed by retired Justice Javed Iqbal, directed the Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of Interior to lodge criminal cases against some 117 officials of secret agencies, police and Frontier Corps accusing them of participating in illegal abductions of individuals across the country. Despite the 400-page report and its very clear recommendations, forced disappearances have continued in Pakistan.

Accusations of blasphemy

Since the disappearance of the five activists this month, there has been a campaign against them on social media accusing them of blasphemy - a sensitive issue in Pakistan that has cost the life of several activists and politicians including federal minister Shahbaz Bhatti and the governor of the Punjab province, Salmaan Taseer, both in 2011.

Not only are the activists missing, but those that are speaking out to demand accountability now bear the risk of being painted as supporters of blasphemers.

The controversial blasphemy law, which activists allege has been used as an easy way to settle disputes, seems to be an added tool in the campaign against these activists deemed problematic for breaching national security - another excuse regularly employed to silence free speech.

This is especially concerning because the government passed the controversial cybercrime related act, the Pakistan Electronic Crimes Act 2016, in August 2016, that has been criticised for its draconian approach to freedom of expression online.

In October 2016, the military's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency successfully sought the authority from the government to take pre-emptive actions against individuals or organisations that it deems to be breaching national security.

However, the forced disappearances of these activists have happened outside the law, leaving their families with no legal recourse and no way of inquiring the whereabouts of their loved ones.

There are two important takeaways from these alarming disappearances. First, that the state apparatus is willing to go beyond the draconian laws it has pushed through to silence dissent and free speech. Second, that the state is successful in setting a narrative where not free speech, but the extent of the limits around it are being negotiated by citizens.

Many fear these disappearances are a warning shot: Whereas traditional media was easier to censor, it has been more difficult to silence individuals on digital media. These disappearances are setting a precedent whereby many bloggers and activists are likely to give up their right to freedom of expression and choose censorship in fear of similar consequences.

Forced disappearances will not silence us

However, amid fears and unconfirmed reports of more disappearances, hundreds have come out to the streets to demonstrate across Pakistan and to make one thing clear: They will not be silenced. [\[1\]](#)

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[Al Jazeera](#)

[\[1\] Video about the protests](#)