

Investigative Journalism and Policy Reform in Pakistan A Case Study of Media-Led Accountability and Its Structural Limitations

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Abstract - This study critically examines the impact of investigative journalism on policy reform and institutional accountability in Pakistan through a qualitative case study of the Panama Papers, Pandora Papers, the recent "Dubai Unlocked" investigation, and the Malik Riaz Hussain case. Grounded in watchdog theory of journalism and agenda-setting theory, it analyses how media exposés interact with political will, judicial independence, and public pressure. The findings suggest that while such reporting has prompted high-profile resignations and judicial inquiries, its long-term effect on structural reforms remains constrained by state censorship, weak journalist protections, institutional inertia, and elite impunity. The study concludes with context-specific policy recommendations to enhance legal safeguards for journalists, promote civil society oversight, and institutionalise follow-up mechanisms for corruption disclosures.

Key words: Institutional accountability, Investigative journalism, Institutional inertia, State censorship

Introduction

*It struck me that there is a reason James Madison put freedom of speech and freedom of the press in the very first amendment.
If we can't speak out, if we cannot challenge those in power, there is no guaranteeing the rights that follow.¹*

These words by Jonathan Karl in his seminal book *The Front Row at the Trump Show* mark the essence of investigative journalism—a form of journalism that exists precisely to challenge those in power and hold them accountable. The concept of investigative journalism has been interpreted variably by scholars across different historical periods and cultural contexts, which shows its evolving nature and multifaceted roles within society. The roots of investigative journalism can be traced back to early trailblazers like William Thomas Stead, who brought public attention to child prostitution in 1880s London; the American muckrakers, who exposed corruption and social injustices around the turn of the 20th century; and Ester Blenda Nordström, who, in 1914, went undercover as a maid on a Swedish farm. Their groundbreaking work laid the foundation for the form of journalism that, by the 1960s, had come to be recognized as investigative reporting.² The first formal definition of investigative journalism approved by a professional association was developed by Investigative Reporters and Editors (IRE), a U.S.-based organization established in 1975. The definition reads: “the reporting, through one’s own initiative and work product, of matters important to readers, viewers, or listeners. In many cases, the subjects of the reporting wish the matters under scrutiny to remain undisclosed.”³

¹ Jonathan Karl, *The Front Row at the Trump Show* (New York: Dutton, 2020).

<https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/10512049-it-struck-me-that-there-is-a-reason-james-madison>

² Achilleas Karadimitriou, Torbjörn Von Krogh, Christian Ruggiero, Cecilia Biancalana, Mauro Bomba, and Wai Lo, “Investigative Journalism and the Watchdog Role of News Media between Acute Challenges and Exceptional Counterbalances,” *Investigative Journalism and the Watchdog Role of News Media*, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.48335/9789188855589-5>.

³ “Introduction to Investigative Journalism,” *GIJN.org*, 2024, <https://gijn.org/resource/introduction-investigative-journalism/>.

Investigative journalism lacks a clear set of defining criteria, as it encompasses a wide range of forms and approaches.⁴ Investigative Reporters and Editors (IRE) propounds that “systematic, in-depth, and original research and reporting, often involving the unearthing of secrets, heavy use of public records, and computer assisted reporting, with a focus on social justice and accountability” forms the hallmark of investigative journalism.⁵ Some scholars add a moral dimension to their definition of investigative journalism by incorporating the task of journalists to express moral judgment about potential misdoing or malefaction.⁶ Ettema and Glasser describe investigative journalism as being characterised by a moralising impact, supporting virtues such as the value of justice by exposing news stories of terrible villainy with journalists often being in the context of “tensions between detached observation and active moral agency”.⁷ While there is no holistic standard that captures common investigative journalism practices across both developed and developing democracies⁸ academics and practitioners widely acknowledge its systematic and time-consuming nature.⁹

Investigative journalism is considered to make significant contributions to democratic governance by monitoring the performance of democratic institutions. Media reporting in general, and especially investigative journalism by affiliated or independent journalists, or indeed non-governmental organisations (NGOs), are among the most important sources of public awareness-raising on political, social, economic and human rights issues.¹⁰ For instance, media reporting is an essential source of detection in corruption cases, either for law enforcement authorities that investigate allegations contained in the press, or indeed for companies that decide to conduct internal investigations or self-report, or anti-money laundering reporting entities that make suspicious transaction reports, following queries from the media or published articles.¹¹ For instance, the Panama Papers investigation, which received the Pulitzer Prize for Explanatory Reporting in April 2017, emerged from a five-year reporting effort by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ). The investigation exposed financial secrecy havens and identified the top ten countries where intermediaries operate: Hong Kong (China), the United Kingdom, Switzerland, the United States, Panama, Guatemala, Luxembourg, Brazil, Ecuador, and Uruguay.¹²

It is notable that only publishing a set of leaked documents, without conducting further reporting or consulting additional sources, does not constitute an investigation.¹³ Leaks can serve as the starting

⁴ Ricarda Drüeke, “Medien, Öffentlichkeit und Demokratie: Zur Watchdog-Funktion von Medien [Media, the Public and Democracy: On the Watchdog Function of the Media],” *Forschungsjournal Soziale Bewegungen* 31, no. 3 (2018): 19–28, <https://doi.org/10.1515/fjsb-2018-0059>.

⁵ Investigative Reporters & Editors, *The Reporter's Handbook* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983).

⁶ Richard Coleman and Lee Wilkins, “Searching for the Ethical Journalist: An Exploratory Study of the Moral Development of News Workers,” *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* 17, no. 3 (2002): 209–25, https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327728JMME1703_03.

⁷ James S. Ettema and Ted Glasser, “Narrative Form and Moral Force: The Realization of Innocence and Guilt through Investigative Journalism,” *Journal of Communication* 38, no. 3 (1988): 8–26.

⁸ Silvio Waisbord, *Watchdog Journalism in South America: News, Accountability, and Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

⁹ David Anderson and Paul Benjaminson, *Investigative Reporting* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976).

¹⁰ OECD, *The Role of the Media and Investigative Journalism in Combating Corruption* (2018), <https://www.oecd.org/corruption/The-role-of-media-and-investigative-journalism-in-combating-corruption.htm>.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² ICIJ (International Consortium of Investigative Journalists), “Explore the Panama Papers Key Figures – ICIJ,” *International Consortium of Investigative Journalists*, January 31, 2017, <https://panamapapers.icij.org/graphs>.

¹³ “Introduction to Investigative Journalism.” *Global Investigative Journalism Network*, 2024. <https://gijn.org/resource/introduction-investigative-journalism/>.

point for an investigation, which is then deepened through multiple sources—such as public records (court, property, and company records), sanctions lists, and interviews with experts and knowledgeable individuals on the subject.¹⁴

In Pakistan, investigative reporting has played a crucial role in uncovering financial misdeeds, abuse of power, and institutional failures. However, the extent to which such disclosures lead to sustained political accountability or meaningful policy reform is a matter of debate and discussion. Despite media exposés prompting short-term political reactions or judicial inquiries, long-term structural changes often remain elusive. Journalists in Pakistan face significant challenges, including censorship, threats, and a lack of institutional support, which limit their capacity to conduct impactful investigations. This study seeks to evaluate the influence of major investigative journalism reports on governance outcomes in Pakistan, focusing on whether media-led disclosures have translated into lasting reform or remained symbolic. It further explores the conditions under which investigative journalism can effectively prompt institutional change.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in multiple interrelated theoretical perspectives that collectively explain the role of journalism, particularly investigative journalism, in promoting accountability, shaping public discourse, and influencing governance. The central theories include the watchdog theory of journalism, the media-as-political-actor perspective, and the system theory. At the core of this study is the watchdog theory of journalism, which views the press as a vital mechanism for holding the state and elites accountable. This theory posits that journalism serves as a guardian of public interest, defending democratic principles by exposing corruption, misconduct, and abuses of power.¹⁵ As McQuail articulates, the watchdog role can be viewed as an extension of fundamental liberal rights such as freedom of speech, opinion, and assembly.¹⁶ This pluralistic view of media power underscores journalism's normative function in democratic societies, where it acts as a conduit between the public and the state.

Building on this, Waisbord emphasises the accountability function of journalism, highlighting its role in ensuring transparency and responsiveness within democratic institutions.¹⁷ Similarly, Donsbach and Patterson assert that investigative journalism is integral to democratic health because it empowers citizens with information and compels political actors to justify their actions.¹⁸ Carson a) further argue that journalism not only informs the public but also functions as a democratic corrective, prompting reforms by revealing systemic failures.¹⁹

This paper also draws on the notion of journalism as a political actor, recognising that contemporary investigative journalism is increasingly collaborative and institutionalised. It involves not just

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ “Watchdog Journalism.” *SAGE Knowledge*, 2025. <https://sk.sagepub.com/dict/mono/key-concepts-in-journalism-studies/chpt/watchdog-journalism>.

¹⁶ McQuail, D. (1994) *Mass Communication Theory*. London: Sage (3rd edn).

¹⁷ Silvio Waisbord, *Watchdog Journalism in South America: News, Accountability, and Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

¹⁸ Wolfgang Donsbach and Thomas E. Patterson, “Political News Journalists,” in *Comparing Political Communication: Theories, Cases, and Challenges*, ed. Frank Esser and Barbara Pfetsch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 251–70.

¹⁹ Andrea Carson, *Investigative Journalism, Democracy and the Digital Age*, 1st ed. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315514291>.

reporters but also editors, lawyers, data analysts, and technology specialists. Silvio Waisbord (2000) and other scholars argue that journalism's influence extends beyond mere exposure; it also mobilises public opinion and catalyses institutional responses.

Producing well-documented and comprehensive investigative stories requires a diverse range of expertise. Reporters, editors, legal specialists, statistical analysts, librarians, and news researchers must collaborate closely throughout the investigative process. A strong understanding of public information access laws is essential—not only to identify what data can be obtained under freedom of information laws, but also to anticipate potential legal challenges that may arise when publishing sensitive or damaging material.²⁰ In politically volatile environments, such as Pakistan, the strategic actions of media organizations—such as forming alliances with civil society groups or leveraging international watchdogs—can enhance the impact of their investigations. Journalism, in this view, operates not in isolation but within a broader political ecosystem where its power lies in orchestrating public pressure and demanding accountability.

This study also draws on system theory, particularly Niklas Luhmann's social systems theory, which views society as a collection of interrelated and interdependent subsystems²¹. Luhmann classifies social systems into three levels: societal systems (such as law, religion, politics, education), organizations (networks of decisions), and interaction systems (systems based on communication). Within this framework, journalism is seen as a subsystem embedded within a larger social system comprising legal, political, and cultural subsystems. The theory posits that changes in one subsystem inevitably affect others, making the safety and autonomy of journalists dependent on the effectiveness and coordination of the legal and political systems. The resilience and functionality of journalism depend on how well these interconnected systems communicate and support each other. Together, these interrelated theoretical perspectives provide a comprehensive lens through which to understand the multifaceted role of journalism, particularly investigative journalism—on policy reform and institutional accountability in Pakistan.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach to examine the influence of investigative journalism on policy reform and institutional accountability in Pakistan. It analyzes three major corruption exposés—the Panama Papers, the Pandora Papers, and the Dubai Property Leaks—selected for their high public visibility, institutional significance, and diverse political outcomes. Data is drawn from two primary sources: (1) media archives, including investigative articles, follow-up reports, and public commentary from reputable national and international outlets, and (2) official policy documents such as judicial verdicts, parliamentary records, government statements, and regulatory reforms. These sources provide insight into both the content of the media investigations and the governmental responses they provoked.

The analysis employs process tracing to uncover causal pathways between media revelations and subsequent policy or judicial actions. In addition, a media-impact assessment framework is applied to evaluate the depth, scope, and sustainability of the institutional responses. This combined methodological approach allows for a comprehensive assessment of both the short-term political

²⁰ Waisbord, Silvio. Why Democracy needs investigative journalism. In: Global issues. US Department of State. Volume 6, Number 1, April 2001.

²¹ Mathias Albert "Luhmann and Systems Theory." Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics. 5 Aug. 2016; Accessed 25 May. 2025. <https://oxfordre.com/politics/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228637-e-7>.

impacts and the long-term structural implications of investigative journalism in Pakistan's governance landscape.

Discussion

State of Investigative Journalism in Pakistan

Understanding the current landscape of investigative journalism in Pakistan requires tracing its historical foundations and analyzing landmark cases that have shaped public discourse and state accountability. Investigative journalism in Pakistan has long existed at the intersection of courage and repression, often challenging authoritarianism, exposing elite corruption, and confronting state institutions. One of the earliest and most influential examples was Zaib-un-Nissa Hamidullah, a pioneering journalist whose editorials in *The Mirror* fiercely criticized the authoritarian regime of President Iskander Mirza and condemned the forced resignation of Prime Minister Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy.²² In response, her publication was banned for six months in 1957. Despite pressure to apologize publicly, Hamidullah, with the support of renowned lawyer A.K. Brohi, challenged the ban in the Supreme Court and won.²³ While her work may not always conform to conventional investigative techniques such as undercover reporting or data-driven analysis, it demonstrated a fearless commitment to political accountability and press freedom.

Another powerful example is Pakistani journalist Anthony Mascarenhas, who drew global attention with his 1971 exposé titled 'Genocide,' published in the UK's *Sunday Times*.²⁴ Mascarenhas was part of a government-sponsored tour of East Pakistan during which he witnessed troubling events, including reports of large-scale violence by the Pakistani military. Troubled by what he saw, he secretly travelled to London and pitched his story to the *Sunday Times*.²⁵ The article was published shortly after his family joined him in London. While Mascarenhas's reporting brought international attention to the crisis in East Pakistan, it also had far-reaching consequences for Pakistan's global image and regional stability. The article played a role in galvanizing international opinion against Pakistan and reportedly influenced Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's decision to intervene militarily—an action that ultimately contributed to the dismemberment of the country. While the intentions behind Mascarenhas's decision to publish his report abroad remain debated—with some alleging foreign support or bias—the case nevertheless underscores the critical role and powerful impact of investigative journalism in Pakistan.

The post-9/11 period saw journalists increasingly target issues of militancy and military overreach. In 2011, Syed Saleem Shahzad, writing for *Asia Times Online*, investigated alleged ties between Pakistan's military and extremist groups.²⁶ He reported that Al Qaeda had infiltrated the Pakistan Navy, contributing to the deadly Mehran naval base attack. Shortly after publishing this piece, Shahzad was found dead under suspicious circumstances, with many attributing his death to extrajudicial actions by intelligence agencies.²⁷

²² TFT archives collection, "Remembering Zeb-Un-Nissa Hamidullah (1921–2000)," *The Friday Times*, October 28, 2016, <https://thefridaytimes.com/28-Oct-2016/remembering-zeb-un-nissa-hamidullah-1921-2000>.

²³Ibid.

²⁴ Mark Dummett, "Bangladesh War: The Article That Changed History," *BBC News*, December 16, 2011, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-16207201>.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶ Dexter Filkins, "The Journalist and the Spies," *The New Yorker*, September 19, 2011, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/09/19/the-journalist-and-the-spies>.

²⁷Ibid.

Umar Cheema, a prominent Pakistani investigative journalist and founder of the Centre for Investigative Reporting in Pakistan, has been at the forefront of exposing high-level corruption and impunity within the country's political and military establishments.

In 2012, Cheema published a groundbreaking report titled "Representation Without Taxation," revealing that nearly 70% of Pakistan's 446 lawmakers had not filed income tax returns for the year 2011.²⁸ This included top officials such as then-President Asif Ali Zardari and 34 out of 55 cabinet ministers. The report, based on leaked government tax records, marked the first time such data was made public and ignited widespread public outrage over the lack of financial accountability among the nation's leadership. Cheema himself was abducted and tortured a year earlier—allegedly by intelligence operatives. During his captivity, Cheema was subjected to severe physical and psychological torture, including beatings with rods and leather straps, forced shaving of his head and eyebrows, and being photographed in humiliating positions.

More recently, Pakistani journalists have contributed to transnational investigations. In 2016, the Panama Papers, led in Pakistan by journalists like Umar Cheema, exposed offshore holdings of political elites, including then-Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's family, ultimately leading to his disqualification by the Supreme Court. In 2021, Umar Cheema and Fakhar Durrani, in collaboration with the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ), played key roles in the Pandora Papers investigation. This exposé unveiled the offshore financial dealings of influential Pakistanis, including media moguls, military-linked individuals, and top business executives.²⁹ In 2024, the Dubai Leaks revealed that hundreds of Pakistani nationals—including politicians, retired military officials, and business elites—had acquired high-value properties in Dubai.

The Global Investigative Journalism Network (GIJN), an international organization dedicated to strengthening the capacity of investigative journalists, described 2023 as "an eventful reporting year," highlighting how local journalists continued to "push boundaries where they can." Among the year's standout investigations, eight stories from Pakistan were featured. One notable investigation by *Soch* analyzed State Bank trade data and defense contracts, revealing that Pakistani-manufactured 155mm artillery shells were sold to the U.S. Department of Defense and routed to Ukraine.

Two *Dawn*'s reports including Muhammad Akbar Notezai's exposé on private jails operated by tribal elites in Balochistan—brought to national attention after the discovery of three bodies near a provincial minister's residence³⁰—and the investigation by Naziha Syed Ali and Aslam Shah into Karachi's tanker mafia—revealing the organized theft and monetization of the city's water supply through the collusion of political, military, and administrative actors—were also featured.³¹

²⁸ AFP, "Report Unmasks Tax Evasion among Pakistan Leaders," *The Express Tribune*, December 12, 2012, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/478812/report-unmasks-tax-evasion-among-pakistan-leaders>.

²⁹ "Prime Minister Imran Khan Promised 'New Pakistan' but Members of His Inner Circle Secretly Moved Millions Offshore," *International Consortium of Investigative Journalists*, n.d., <https://www.icij.org/investigations/pandora-papers/pakistan-imran-khan-prime-minister-allies-offshore/>.

³⁰ Muhammad Akbar Notezai, "Private Jails in Balochistan's Fiefdoms," *Dawn*, July 5, 2023, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1763048>.

³¹ Naziha Syed Ali Shah and Aslam, "Dawn Investigations: Selling Liquid Gold — Karachi's Tanker Mafia," *Dawn*, January 24, 2023, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1733033>.

Other notable investigations included *The Intercept's* publication of a secret diplomatic cipher central to former Prime Minister Imran Khan's claims of a conspiracy behind his 2022 ouster; *Fact Focus's* report on retired Lt. Gen. Shafaatullah Shah's misdeclared foreign assets; *Lok Sujag's* coverage of the dire state of a rural health center in Rajanpur; *The Citizenry's* critique of Sindh's underutilized climate adaptation budget; and *Profit by Pakistan Today's* analysis of the Temporary Economic Relief Facility and the controversies surrounding its implementation.

Together, these cases reflect the evolution of investigative journalism in Pakistan—from individual acts of defiance during military rule to sophisticated, data-driven collaborations with global partners.

The Impact of Investigative Journalism on Policy Outcomes in Pakistan: Case Studies and Analysis

This section examines whether investigative journalism in Pakistan has led to tangible policy outcomes, using key case studies to analyse its influence on governance, accountability, and reform.

Case 1: Panama Papers (2016)

Widespread concerns about elite corruption, lack of financial transparency, and undeclared wealth plagued Pakistan's governance system but often lacked evidence strong enough to provoke institutional or judicial action. In April 2016, the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) released the Panama Papers—a leak of 11.5 million documents from the Panamanian law firm Mossack Fonseca. The 2.6-terabyte data trove, covering nearly four decades of financial records, exposed the offshore holdings of over 210,000 companies across 21 jurisdictions.³² Among those implicated were high-profile figures from around the world, including then-Prime Minister of Pakistan, Nawaz Sharif, and his family. Pakistani investigative journalist Umar Cheema, a member of the ICIJ team, played a pivotal role in uncovering the financial trails of the Sharif family. The leaked documents revealed that Sharif's children owned undisclosed offshore companies and assets which raised serious concerns about tax evasion and the legitimacy of their wealth. This development can be analyzed through the lens of the Watchdog Theory of Journalism, which conceptualizes journalists as guardians of the public interest, holding those in power accountable.

The Panama Papers shifted the public discourse toward issues of corruption, transparency, and accountability at the highest levels of government. Political parties, civil society organisations, and media outlets extensively covered the revelations, fueling public pressure and forcing state institutions to act. The opposition party, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), led by Imran Khan, capitalized on the momentum by filing a petition in the Supreme Court seeking Nawaz Sharif's disqualification.

Institutionally, the Supreme Court took suo motu notice, leading to the creation of a Joint Investigation Team (JIT) in 2017. The state's investigative apparatus—including the National Accountability Bureau (NAB)—activated its legal and enforcement mechanisms to probe the wealth and disclosures of the Sharif family.

This institutional engagement exemplifies Systems Theory, where the media's exposure of a fault in the political system led to responsive adaptations by other subsystems (judiciary, enforcement agencies, political opposition), restoring a form of systemic equilibrium.

In July 2017, Nawaz Sharif was disqualified from office by the Supreme Court under Article 62(1)(f) of the Constitution. Subsequent legal proceedings led to his conviction and a 10-year prison

³²International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ), "Explore the Panama Papers Key Figures," January 31, 2017, <https://www.icij.org/investigations/panama-papers/explore-panama-papers-key-figures/>

sentence in the Avenfield Apartments case in 2018. His daughter, Maryam Nawaz and son-in-law, Captain Safdar, also received prison terms.

Politically, the scandal contributed to PTI's 2018 electoral victory, where they campaigned strongly on an anti-corruption platform. In office, the PTI established the Assets Recovery Unit (ARU) in September 2018. The ARU was set up to "provide a forum" for law enforcement agencies, National Accountability Bureau (NAB), Federal Investigation Agency (FIA), Financial Monitoring Unit (FMU) and provincial anti-corruption establishments (ACEs) to "trace new cases and track all existing cases targeting eventual repatriation of unlawfully acquired offshore assets". The ARU helped recover Rs426.4 billion from 2019 to 2022, according to documents prepared by the Cabinet Division.³³

This case illustrates how investigative journalism, guided by the watchdog role, can catalyse systemic change. The media acted not just as observers but as political actors, shaping discourse, influencing judicial proceedings, and altering electoral outcomes. By exposing the hidden operations of elite financial misconduct, journalism created a domino effect that engaged multiple subsystems in Pakistan's governance structure.

Case 2: Pandora Papers

While the Panama Papers marked a watershed moment for accountability in Pakistan, the long-term sustainability of investigative impact was called into question with the release of the Pandora Papers (2021) and Dubai Leaks. These leaks exposed offshore financial dealings of over 700 Pakistani individuals, including key members of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) government, military officials, and media proprietors. This raised critical concerns about the consistency, impartiality, and institutional capacity of Pakistan's anti-corruption efforts. Public skepticism intensified around the perception of selective accountability, where political opponents were prosecuted while allies remained shielded.

Released in October 2021, the Pandora Papers comprise 11.9 million leaked documents obtained by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ). In Pakistan, the investigation was spearheaded by Umar Cheema and Fakhar Durrani of The News International. They uncovered a complex web of offshore shell companies, trusts, and accounts linked to politicians, military figures, and business elites.³⁴ High-profile individuals such as Finance Minister Shaukat Tarin, PML-Q leader Chaudhry Moonis Elahi, and several bureaucrats were named.

This intervention once again demonstrated the role of journalism as a watchdog, aiming to hold power to account by bringing hidden financial activities into the public domain. However, it also tested journalism's credibility and neutrality, especially when some media owners and journalists themselves were named in the leaks, complicating the traditional boundary between exposers and exposed.

In response, the Prime Minister's Inspection Commission set up a high-level cell to examine the offshore assets of 240 Pakistani nationals. The inquiry reportedly completed 80% of its fact-finding

³³ Tahir Sherani, "PTI Govt's ARU Recovered Rs426bn in Last 3 Years, Cabinet Division Documents Reveal," *Dawn*, May 30, 2022, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1692263>.

³⁴ *Dawn.com*, "Shaukat Tarin, Moonis Elahi among over 700 Pakistanis Named in ICIJ's Pandora Papers," *Dawn*, October 3, 2021, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1649930>.

mission by early 2022, with responses obtained from most of the public officeholders and military personnel involved. However, no significant prosecutions, resignations, or court proceedings followed.

The lack of formal action starkly contrasted with the judicial and political repercussions that followed the Panama Papers, revealing institutional inertia and the erosion of systemic feedback mechanisms, as explained in Systems Theory. While the system received new input (the Pandora revelations), it failed to adapt or correct itself through enforcement or reform.

Despite widespread media coverage and initial governmental gestures, the Pandora Papers did not result in tangible legal or policy outcomes. No high-profile resignations occurred. Prominent individuals like Moonis Elahi claimed to have dropped offshore ventures preemptively. The issue gradually faded from public discourse without leading to deeper institutional reform or legislative overhaul.

The situation further revealed structural weaknesses in Pakistan's accountability regime: anti-corruption agencies like NAB faced growing criticism for acting as political tools, selectively targeting opposition figures while ignoring transgressions by those in power.

The Pandora Papers highlighted the limits of the watchdog function when not supported by independent, depoliticised institutions. Despite powerful revelations and credible journalism, the media's role as a political actor was blunted due to internal conflicts of interest (with some journalists also implicated) and a lack of sustained institutional response. The Sadiq and Ameen clause (Article 62(1)(f)), which had been used to disqualify Nawaz Sharif in 2017, was not applied uniformly, reflecting political asymmetry in the application of law.

From a systems theory perspective, the system absorbed the shock without activating meaningful regulatory or judicial mechanisms, suggesting that the output (legal reform, prosecution) did not match the input (journalistic exposé). This asymmetry undermines long-term systemic integrity and public trust.

In sum, the Pandora Papers case underscores a sobering reality: investigative journalism can expose, but cannot enforce. When institutions lack impartiality and political incentives override legal principles, the potential of journalism to catalyse reform remains unrealised—no matter how thorough or compelling the revelations.

CASE 3: Dubai Leaks

Following the global impact of the Panama Papers (2016) and Pandora Papers (2021), Dubai Unlocked emerged in May 2024 as the third major investigative exposé shedding light on global financial secrecy — this time focusing on real estate ownership in Dubai. The investigation, a collaborative effort involving more than 70 media organizations coordinated by the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP), was based on data obtained by the Center for Advanced Defense Studies (C4ADS), a Washington-based non-profit. The data provided detailed insights into hundreds of thousands of Dubai properties and their ownership, primarily from the years 2020 and 2022.

In Pakistan, the investigation was led by journalists Atika Rehman and Naziha Syed Ali from Dawn, alongside Fakhur Durrani and Umar Cheema of The News International, who have built reputations through consistent work on global financial investigations. The data revealed that over 22,000 Pakistani citizens own real estate in Dubai, with total asset values estimated between \$11 billion

and \$12.5 billion—an astonishing figure that further exposes the magnitude of offshore financial flows.³⁵

Among the individuals named were high-profile political figures and bureaucrats, including the children of President Asif Ali Zardari, Hussain Nawaz Sharif, Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi's wife, Farah Gogi, Senator Faisal Vawda, PTI leader Sher Afzal Marwat, and former ministers and lawmakers from Sindh and Balochistan. Former President Pervez Musharraf and ex-Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz also featured in the leaks, along with over a dozen retired generals, diplomats, police officers, and civil servants, which shows the entrenched cross-institutional nature of elite offshore investments.

The case of former Karachi police officer Rao Anwar was emblematic of systemic rot. Despite a modest official income, Anwar had made 74 trips to Dubai over six years and was found to own a six-bedroom villa in Dubai Hills Estate worth \$6.67 million, among other assets linked through his spouse. This raised red flags regarding illicit enrichment, money laundering, and abuse of office. Similarly, Dr. Mukhtar Hamid Shah, known for illegal organ transplants, was linked to nine properties in Dubai—assets accumulated even after being charged in Pakistan in 2016. His ability to secure bail and continue business until he died in 2019 highlighted enforcement failures.

While some individuals defended their property holdings — Bilawal Bhutto Zardari's spokesperson stated that the properties were inherited and declared with relevant Pakistani authorities, and Minister Naqvi and others claimed compliance with tax laws — the revelations reignited public debate about elite impunity and offshore wealth.

The political fallout was immediate. Jamaat-e-Islami's Hafiz Naeem-ur-Rehman demanded the resignations of all implicated figures, accusing them of betraying public trust. Despite these calls, the government's response remained muted. The Federal Board of Revenue (FBR) expressed intent to examine the leaked data for tax compliance, but as of May 2025, no significant legal proceedings or systemic reforms had materialised.

Legal experts argued that the FBR is empowered to review the wealth statements of individuals named in the leaks.³⁶ If assets are found to be undeclared or disproportionate to declared income, the FBR can amend tax returns and impose penalties. However, in practice, these powers are rarely exercised without political will, and enforcement tends to be selective. As with previous leaks, the revelations have served more as instruments of political scoring than as triggers for institutional reform.

The Dubai Unlocked case underscores the growing power of transnational investigative journalism in exposing hidden wealth and elite impunity. Pakistani journalists played a crucial role in surfacing politically sensitive information, yet the lack of robust institutional follow-through highlights the systemic constraints in translating investigative reporting into legal or policy outcomes.

Case 4: The Case of Malik Riaz Hussain

While global financial scandals such as the Panama, Pandora, and Dubai leaks have unveiled the financial misconduct of numerous individuals, a particularly salient case in Pakistan is that of Malik Riaz Hussain, the founder of Bahria Town and one of the country's most influential real estate tycoons. Over the years, Riaz has faced numerous accusations, including large-scale corruption, illegal land acquisitions, and unauthorised development. His real estate empire has grown into a

³⁵ Umar Cheema, "Pakistanis Own Properties Worth Billions of Dollars in Dubai," *The News International*, May 14, 2024, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/1189032-pakistanis-own-properties-worth-billions-of-dollars-in-dubai>.

³⁶ *Dawn.com*, "Offshore Properties, Taxes and Laws: 5 Questions You May Have Following the Dubai Leaks," *Dawn*, May 20, 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1834044>.

symbol of modern urban development, yet legal controversies and allegations of deep political entanglement are there, too.

Reports surfaced in 2017 that reveal the struggles faced by law enforcement agencies, media persons, and judicial members, including transfers or demotions for years to take decisive action against him, often due to his significant influence in both political and legal circles.³⁷ A notable episode occurred during the tenure of Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry, who, after assuming office in 2005, initiated judicial activism. This empowered hundreds of citizens to file petitions against Bahria Town's operations. However, those efforts were undermined by a sustained character assassination campaign against the Chief Justice himself, eventually leading to the dismissal of numerous legal challenges against Riaz.

The classic watchdog theory of journalism (McQuail, 1994) positions the press as an institution that monitors centres of power and informs the public of abuses. In the case of Malik Riaz, traditional media outlets had long shied away from reporting on his activities due to his immense financial influence and the libel risks associated with targeting powerful actors. Hamza Azhar Salam's reporting revealed that Malik Riaz had gifted a £250,000 (PKR 78 million) luxury Bentley to Farah Gogi, a close aide of former First Lady Bushra Bibi, and had paid for extravagant shopping sprees in Dubai and London.

Furthermore, Salam's investigation revealed that in 2019, Malik Riaz's family transferred £190 million (PKR 38 billion) in settlement funds to the UK's National Crime Agency (NCA)—an amount later controversially repatriated to Pakistan under Imran Khan's government and reportedly used to benefit Bahria Town itself. The secrecy surrounding this deal—and the role of political figures in facilitating it—only came to light through Salam's exposé. His revelations challenged the official narrative and sparked a public debate, although no formal prosecution followed.

These disclosures led to the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) opening inquiries into the offshore dealings of Farah Gogi and Riaz's connections to various politicians, though no conclusive legal action has followed. In effect, the media, through investigative reporting, substituted for institutional failure by performing a quasi-judicial role: exposing, documenting, and prosecuting in the court of public opinion.

In recent years, the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) has ramped up its scrutiny of Riaz's activities. The allegations centred around the unlawful acquisition of 4,500 kanals of state land for the Bahria Golf City project and the incorporation of state-owned land into Bahria Town's residential projects through collusion with officials from the Revenue and Forest departments.³⁸ Furthermore, in January 2025, NAB launched inquiries into deceptive practices by Malik Riaz, accusing him of illegally possessing state-owned and private lands in Karachi, Takht-Parri, Rawalpindi, and New Murree. These lands were allegedly used to develop housing societies without obtaining mandatory regulatory permissions, defrauding the state and the public of billions of rupees. In a significant move, NAB sealed numerous Bahria Town properties across the country in March 2025, including commercial and residential properties in Karachi, Lahore, Takht Pari, New Murree, and Islamabad. Additionally, hundreds of bank accounts and vehicles associated with Bahria Town were frozen as part of the ongoing investigations.³⁹ The controversies surrounding Malik Riaz have also intersected with Pakistan's political landscape. In January 2025, former Prime

³⁷ *DailyTimes.pk*, “‘Land Grabbing’: Dozens of Cases against Malik Riaz Await Decisions,” *Daily Times*, October 29, 2017, <https://dailytimes.com.pk/131768/land-grabbing-dozens-cases-malik-riaz-await-decisions/>

³⁸ Malik Asad, “NAB Files Fresh Cases against Malik Riaz over Illegal Land Grab,” *Dawn*, February 19, 2025, https://www.dawn.com/news/1892931?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

³⁹ Staff Report, “NAB Seals Numerous Bahria Town Properties over Cases against Malik Riaz,” *Pakistan Today*, March 17, 2025, <https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2025/03/17/nab-seals-numerous-bahria-town-properties-sealed-across-country-over-cases-against-malik-riaz/>.

Minister Imran Khan and his wife, Bushra Bibi, were sentenced to 14 and 7 years in prison, respectively, for corruption.⁴⁰ They were found guilty of acquiring valuable plots of land through a corrupt deal with Malik Riaz, highlighting the tycoon's deep entanglement with political figures. Moreover, the Pakistani government has sought the extradition of Malik Riaz from the United Arab Emirates, where he has been residing since 2023. Despite these efforts, Riaz remains a fugitive, residing in Dubai since 2023, with the Pakistani government seeking his extradition. This shows that while political figures such as Imran Khan and his wife were punished for the crime, yet Malik Riaz Hussain himself is living free and luxurious in Dubai and has recently launched a new project of construction of luxury apartments in Dubai, as per NAB's press release released on March 17, 2025⁴¹. Some of the legal actions taken against him include numerous commercial and residential properties of Bahria Town in Karachi, Lahore, Takht Pari, New Murree/Golf City, and Islamabad have been sealed, including multi-story commercial buildings.

This report led to a series of retaliatory actions against Salam, including threats of legal action and personal harm. On 9 December 2022, Salam received a threatening phone call from a Bahria Town representative, warning him to retract the story or face consequences. He also received a legal notice demanding an apology and substantial financial compensation. Despite these threats, Salam continued to report on the story. In the following months, Salam faced multiple legal notices from Malik Riaz's legal team, each demanding exorbitant compensation for alleged defamation. In July 2023, Salam's safety was further jeopardised when he began receiving online threats, with anonymous accounts suggesting physical harm. Fearing for his life, Salam went into hiding.

Determinants of Investigative Journalism's Effectiveness in Advancing Political and Institutional Accountability in Pakistan

Investigative journalism serves as a cornerstone of democratic accountability because it empowers citizens with critical information and compels political actors to justify their actions. It also triggers institutional reforms by exposing systemic dysfunctions. In Pakistan, the extent to which investigative journalism can provoke meaningful political or institutional accountability is shaped by a complex interplay of structural, legal, economic, and political factors. These include the legal-regulatory landscape, political and institutional pressures, financial constraints, safety and working conditions for journalists, public access to information, and the responsiveness of the judiciary and state institutions. The following section examines these determinants and their impact on press freedom and democratic oversight in Pakistan.

Regulatory and Legal Environment

The Right to Information (RTI) is internationally recognized as a fundamental human right, falling under the broader category of freedom of speech as outlined in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which Pakistan is a signatory.⁴² Pakistan took an early step by promulgating the Freedom of Information Ordinance in 2002, becoming the first country in South

⁴⁰ Amrit Dhillon, "Imran Khan, Ex-Pakistani Prime Minister, Jailed for 14 Years," *The Times*, January 17, 2025, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/imran-khan-pakistan-jailed-sentence-ftfv0rs2z?utm>

⁴¹ PID, "Press Release," *Press Information Department*, 2025, https://pid.gov.pk/site/press_detail/28326

⁴² "Information and Learning Material on Core Human Rights Conventions Ratified by Pakistan Government of Pakistan Ministry of Human Rights 2022," n.d., <https://mohr.gov.pk/SiteImage/Misc/files/Information%20and%20Learning%20Material%20on%20Core%20Human%20Rights%20Convention.pdf>.

Asia to establish a formal RTI framework.⁴³ However, this ordinance was largely symbolic and limited in scope, as access to information had not yet been recognized as a constitutional right. That same year, the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) was established, ostensibly to regulate broadcast media but often criticized for curbing media freedom.

The 1973 Constitution of Pakistan did not initially guarantee access to information as a constitutional right.⁴⁴ It was not until the 18th Constitutional Amendment in 2010 that the Right to Information was formally recognized through the inclusion of Article 19-A.⁴⁵

At the federal level, the 2002 FOI Ordinance was replaced by the more comprehensive Right to Information Act, 2013, which aimed to expand access to public records and improve transparency.⁴⁶ Despite these legislative advancements, RTI petitions remain uncommon, largely due to a lack of awareness among the general public and even within the journalistic community. Furthermore, the promise of RTI is undermined by broader restrictions on freedom of expression and media.

In 2016, the government introduced the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) to address cybercrimes.⁴⁷ However, PECA has frequently been used to restrict online freedom of expression, particularly targeting dissent and criticism of state institutions. In 2021, the Protection of Journalists and Media Professionals Act was passed, but the protections it offered were conditional, often undermined by vague provisions about the "conduct" of journalists.⁴⁸

In January 2025, significant amendments to PECA were adopted which introduced nine new categories of unlawful online content, many of which were vaguely defined. Dissemination of such content was made punishable by up to three years in prison, and suspects could be arrested without a warrant. Content deemed illegal included: Publications "against the ideology of Pakistan", material seen to "coerce or intimidate the public", criticism of the judiciary, armed forces, or parliament, content "known to be fake or false or reasonably believed to be so".

The amendments also established a new regulatory authority, replacing the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority, with members directly appointed by the government, significantly enhancing state control over digital spaces. These developments provoked widespread backlash. On 31 January 2025, journalists across Pakistan observed a "black day" organized by leading media organizations.⁴⁹ The Joint Action Committee (JAC) condemned the amendments and the lack of stakeholder engagement. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) convened a consultation that led to the formation of a civil society coalition. According to the Freedom Network's 2025 annual report, titled "Free Speech and Public Interest Journalism Under Siege", the PECA amendments have deepened the crisis for free expression in Pakistan.⁵⁰ The report

⁴³ Jamil Afzal and Yongmei Chen, "Federal and Provincial Legislation Regarding 'Right to Information' for Good Governance in Pakistan," *Discover Global Society* 1, no. 1 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s44282-023-00015-7>.

⁴⁴ R. Sardar, "Governance and the Right to Information Laws in Pakistan: A Gender Perspective," *Pakistan Administrative Review* 2, no. 2 (2018): 254–66, <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-58643-1>.

⁴⁵ Constitution of Pakistan, Article 19-A https://na.gov.pk/uploads/documents/1302138356_934.pdf

⁴⁶ R. Sardar, "Governance and the Right to Information Laws in Pakistan: A Gender Perspective," *Pakistan Administrative Review* 2, no. 2 (2018): 254–66, <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-58643-1>.

⁴⁷ Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, 2016 (Pakistan) https://www.na.gov.pk/uploads/documents/1470910659_707.pdf

⁴⁸ Protection of Journalists and Media Professionals Act, 2021 (Pakistan) https://na.gov.pk/uploads/documents/1636461074_763.pdf

⁴⁹ Naimat Khan, "Pakistani Journalists Observe 'Black Day' against New Law to Regulate Social Media," *Arab News*, January 31, 2025, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2588499/pakistan>.

⁵⁰ Ikram Junaidi, "Pakistan's Media Faces Existential Threat: Freedom Network," *DAWN.COM*, May 2025, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1907652>.

underscores how the revised law has made it easier for authorities to arrest, fine, and imprison journalists and dissidents, both offline and online.

While agencies like the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) have initiated investigations into corruption, the judicial system's inefficiencies often allow powerful individuals to evade justice. Selective enforcement of accountability measures and loopholes in the legal system undermine the impact of investigative journalism.⁵¹

Political and Institutional Pressures

A primary constraint on investigative journalism in Pakistan stems from the overarching influence of political actors, military institutions, and intelligence agencies, which limits the operational autonomy of journalists. Niklas Luhmann's systems theory views journalism as a subsystem embedded within and influenced by broader political, legal, and security systems. In Pakistan, the legal system often fails to provide safeguards to journalists against political and institutional overreach.

In late 2022, Ahmed Noorani, a seasoned investigative journalist, published an exposé on the digital platform FactFocus, detailing the tax records and asset accumulation of former Pakistan Army Chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa and his family.⁵² The report implied significant financial irregularities during Bajwa's tenure and raised legitimate public interest concerns. In keeping with the watchdog role, Noorani's reporting sought to fulfill journalism's democratic obligation to expose possible corruption and demand institutional transparency. However, rather than prompting an investigation into the alleged misconduct, Noorani became the target of legal action. In December 2022, the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) filed a First Information Report against him, accusing him of illegally obtaining tax documents.⁵³ Consequently, Noorani was declared a "proclaimed offender," a designation that allows authorities to confiscate his properties and assets if he surrenders. While he later moved to exile in the United States, the repercussions of his reporting have extended to his family. On March 19, 2025, Noorani's two brothers, Muhammad Saifur Rehman Haider and Muhammad Ali, were forcibly taken from their Islamabad residence by individuals believed to be affiliated with intelligence agencies. The abduction occurred shortly after Noorani's publication of a report alleging that diplomatic passports were issued to family members of Pakistan's Army Chief without official justification.

In response to the abduction, Noorani's mother petitioned the Islamabad High Court (IHC) for the recovery of her sons—both engineers with no links to his journalism—alleging enforced disappearance as collective punishment. The IHC summoned the Islamabad IG, seeking a detailed report.⁵⁴ Despite these legal proceedings, the whereabouts of Noorani's brothers remained unknown as of late March 2025. This and many other cases underscore the perilous environment for investigative journalists in Pakistan, where not only the reporters but also their families can become targets of intimidation and retribution with little to no legal and judicial support for them. The international community, including organisations like Amnesty International, has condemned these actions, viewing them as blatant violations of press freedom and human rights.

⁵¹Mansoor Ahmad, "Accountability Challenges," *The News International*, January 27, 2025, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/1276847-accountability-challenges>.

⁵² "Pakistani Reporter Charged Because He Investigated Former Army Chief," *RSF.org*, June 22, 2023, <https://rsf.org/en/pakistani-reporter-charged-because-he-investigated-former-army-chief>.

⁵³ Nilofar Mughal, "Journalist Says Investigative Reporting Is a Risky Business in Pakistan," *Voice of America*, June 23, 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/a/journalist-says-investigative-reporting-is-a-risky-business-in-pakistan/7150701.html>.

⁵⁴ Tahir Naseer, "Petition Filed in IHC for Recovery of US-Based Journalist Ahmad Noorani's 2 Brothers," *DAWN.COM*, March 19, 2025, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1898954>.

Economic Constraints and Ownership Influence

Media ownership plays a crucial role in shaping a healthy public sphere and functioning democracy. However, media industries often rely on governments for regulatory support, favorable laws, and financial incentives, making it difficult for them to challenge state authority.⁵⁵ Similarly, advertisers exert influence, discouraging coverage that may harm their interests⁵⁶. For instance, the Nixon administration threatened the *Washington Post* after the Watergate exposé, while pharmaceutical companies pressured the *New York Times* over drug-related stories⁵⁷. Concentrated media ownership, therefore, limits diverse discourse, resulting in what McChesney calls “a rich media, poor democracy.”⁵⁸

Until the early 2000s, Pakistan’s electronic media remained under state control. General Musharraf’s regime liberalized the media landscape in 2002, partly in response to India’s narrative dominance during the 1998 Kargil conflict and the 2000 plane hijack. This led to the creation of PEMRA, but the new media space was structurally dependent on state favor and lacked editorial freedom.

Cross-media ownership permitted in 2007 further compromised journalistic independence. Prominent newspapers invested in television channels, prioritizing business interests over editorial integrity. Owners began interfering in newsrooms, undermining free speech. This regulatory and financial dependency has kept Pakistan’s media industry vulnerable to state influence and coercive control, both legal and extra-legal.

Media plurality remains limited. The top eight conglomerates – Jang, ARY, Express, Government Group, Nawa-i-Waqt, Samaa, Dawn, and Dunya – dominate print, TV, radio, and digital sectors, reaching 68% of the audience.⁵⁹ Despite 88 TV channels, 209 radio stations, and over 250,000 people working in the media sector as of 2019, diversity of content and ownership remains minimal.

PEMRA regulates TV and radio, while the Press Council oversees print. Yet, the concentration of ownership has led to editorial uniformity and a focus on profit over public interest. Media outlets rely on government advertisements and political connections to survive, creating space for financial and political pressures to shape editorial choices. The withdrawal of ads is a common tool to silence dissent.

Digital media is also under tight control. The Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) regulates internet content, and in February 2024, imposed a nationwide ban on Twitter (now X) to stifle protests against alleged election fraud. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan condemned this as an attack on democratic rights and economic stability.

⁵⁵ Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988).

⁵⁶ J. Herbert Altschull, *Agents of Power: The Media and Public Policy* (New York: Longman, 1995).

⁵⁷ C. Edwin Baker, *Media Concentration and Democracy: Why Ownership Matters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 64–66.

⁵⁸ Robert W. McChesney, *Rich Media, Poor Democracy: Communication Politics in Dubious Times* (New York: New Press, 1999), 55.

⁵⁹ Centre for Media and Democracy Pakistan, “Media Ownership Monitor: Pakistan,” accessed May 26, 2025, <https://pakistan.mom-rsf.org>.

Journalists often face delayed salaries, job insecurity, and political intimidation, fostering a culture of self-censorship. While Pakistan's media may appear vibrant, the structural and financial constraints it operates under limit its ability to serve as a truly independent pillar of democracy.

Safety and Working Conditions for Journalists

Pakistan remains one of the most dangerous countries for journalists, marked by violence, censorship, and impunity. It ranks 12th on CPJ's *Global Impunity Index 2024*, which highlights countries where journalists are murdered and the perpetrators go unpunished. Reporters Without Borders ranked Pakistan 152nd out of 180 in its 2024 Press Freedom Index, down from 145th in 2021, indicating worsening conditions for press freedom.⁶⁰

The Freedom Network reports that between 2012 and 2022, 53 journalists were killed for their work, with only two cases leading to convictions. In her paper *Caught Between Five Extremes: Reporting Pakistan*, Dawn journalist Razeshta Sethna identifies the main pressures on Pakistani media: the state, military, political parties, militant groups, and Islamist organizations.⁶¹ Her study highlights that the state not only fails to protect journalists but often contributes to their harassment and intimidation.

Freedom House's 2023 report notes both civilian and military interference in the media, including bans on TV anchors, attacks, forced disappearances, and censorship.⁶² In August 2022, ARY News was taken off air after a PTI official criticized the military; he was later arrested and charged with sedition. That October, ARY anchor Arshad Sharif was assassinated in Kenya after fleeing threats in Pakistan.⁶³

Access to conflict zones like Balochistan and KP is tightly controlled, with journalists facing threats from both state authorities and insurgents. Investigative reporting is further constrained by financial limitations, restricted access to information, lack of institutional support, and pervasive self-censorship driven by fear rather than direct threats.

Recommendations and Conclusion

This study has examined the role of investigative journalism in shaping governance and policy reform in Pakistan. Through the analysis of prominent case studies such as the Panama Papers, Pandora Papers, Dubai Leaks, and the Malik Riaz Hussain exposé, it is evident that while investigative journalism plays a crucial watchdog role, its capacity to drive long-term structural change remains limited. Investigative journalists in Pakistan have repeatedly exposed high-level corruption and institutional failures, often at great personal risk, contributing significantly to public awareness and, in some instances, prompting judicial or administrative responses. However, these efforts have rarely translated into enduring policy reforms or systemic accountability.

⁶⁰ Reporters Without Borders, *2024 World Press Freedom Index*, accessed May 26, 2025, <https://rsf.org/en/index>.

⁶¹ Razeshta Sethna, "Caught between Five Extremes: Reporting Pakistan," in *In the Service of Power: Media Capture and the Threat to Democracy*, edited by Anya Schiffrin (Washington, DC: Center for International Media Assistance, 2017), 59–70.

⁶² Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2023: Pakistan Country Report*, accessed May 26, 2025, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/pakistan/freedom-world/2023>.

⁶³ "Arshad Sharif: Pakistan Journalist Shot Dead in Kenya," *BBC News*, October 24, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-63372440>

The findings suggest that the structural limitations of Pakistan's legal, political, and media institutions severely hinder the transformative potential of journalism. The entrenched culture of impunity, selective enforcement of laws, media ownership concentration, and state control over digital platforms dilute the impact of even the most rigorous journalistic investigations. While the media can ignite public debate and momentarily pressure institutions to act, its influence wanes without sustained political will, independent judicial processes, and a supportive legal-regulatory framework. Thus, investigative journalism in Pakistan functions more as a substitute for institutional failure rather than as a trigger for meaningful reform.

To enhance the effectiveness and impact of investigative journalism in Pakistan, a range of legal, institutional, and structural reforms is necessary. First, legal protections for journalists must be strengthened. The full implementation of the Protection of Journalists and Media Professionals Act is critical, and independent bodies should be empowered to investigate threats or violence against journalists. These protections must extend to prevent harassment and ensure accountability for those who target journalists, including state and non-state actors.

Second, regulatory reform is needed to curb censorship and state overreach. The Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) should be revisited and revised to remove vague provisions that criminalize dissent and restrict online freedom. Similarly, the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) and the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) must be restructured to function as impartial regulators rather than instruments of political control. Regulatory frameworks should support rather than stifle freedom of expression.

Third, media ownership must be made more transparent and pluralistic. The concentration of ownership in a few conglomerates undermines diversity of opinion and editorial independence. Enforcing cross-ownership restrictions, requiring disclosure of ownership structures, and encouraging independent outlets would improve the quality and integrity of public discourse. Government advertising policies should also be depoliticized to avoid using financial leverage as a tool of editorial control.

Fourth, institutional follow-up on media exposés must be formalized. Government bodies such as NAB and the FBR should be required to initiate timely investigations based on credible journalistic findings and report outcomes publicly. Parliamentary or judicial review panels could be established to examine major revelations and recommend legal or administrative action. This would ensure that disclosures lead to real consequences rather than media spectacles with no accountability. Fifth, the public's right to access information must be protected and expanded. Right to Information (RTI) laws, enshrined in Article 19-A of the Constitution, should be implemented robustly. All government institutions—including those traditionally considered beyond scrutiny—must be made subject to transparency requirements. Awareness campaigns and journalist training on using RTI laws would further strengthen investigative reporting capabilities.

Sixth, there is a pressing need to invest in journalist capacity building. Training programs focused on investigative methods, digital security, and ethics should be institutionalized in collaboration with universities and international media support organizations. Grants and fellowships for long-form investigations would allow journalists to undertake in-depth reporting without fear of financial reprisal.

Seventh, independent and local media outlets should be supported through public-interest journalism funds that operate transparently and independently of state influence. International partnerships and collaborative investigations can offer protection and visibility to local journalists reporting on sensitive issues. Finally, institutional and judicial independence must be fortified to ensure that journalistic revelations result in fair and timely adjudication. Reforms that reduce political interference in judicial appointments and strengthen the capacity of oversight bodies such

as the Election Commission, Auditor General, and Ombudsman are essential to restoring trust in accountability mechanisms.

Together, these recommendations aim to build an environment where investigative journalism can thrive and perform its democratic function effectively. In the absence of systemic reform, journalism will continue to illuminate corruption and injustice—yet remain unable to convert that light into lasting institutional change. For Pakistan to move beyond exposure and toward enforcement, the state must embrace investigative journalism not as a threat, but as a vital partner in democratic governance.

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