

Associate Paper

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Pakistan under the China Model of Governance

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Key Points

- Pakistan's top spy agency, backed by the Army, controls the media, both print and electronic, and is stifling the voice of pro-democracy Pakistanis.
- Most judges in Pakistan's higher judiciary cannot resist the advances and ambitions of Pakistan's spy agency to control the country by stealth.
- Kidnapping, humiliating and torturing journalists who speak for constitutionalism have become the norm.
- The remnants of military rule, in both person and ideology, haunt Pakistan today.
- Pakistan is fast sliding into an undeclared authoritarian rule.

Summary

On 21 July 2020, a senior journalist, Matiullah Jan, who is known for his outspoken views, was [abducted](#) from outside a school where his wife worked as a teacher in Pakistan's capital, Islamabad. [Footage from two CCTV cameras](#) showed a dozen persons in plain clothes and a few armed persons in police uniform in five vehicles approached and apprehended Mr Jan in the street and bundled him into one of their cars, which then drove away. The incident [fuelled an outcry](#), which prompted the release of Mr Jan [after 12 hours of illegal custody](#). He was released by being driven late at night to [a deserted location](#) on the outskirts of Islamabad and abandoned there.



Analysis

Most Pakistanis perceive an agonising drift from democracy in Pakistan. They are gradually awakening to the reality that the China model of Procrustean rule – reduced opposition, controlled society and structured consent – is becoming the norm in their country. The Pakistani media is one victim of that trend.

The “crime” that Matiullah Jan had committed is known to all Pakistanis. As a reporter covering proceedings at the Supreme Court, he reported and interpreted a judgment pointing out the biased behaviour of the judges of the Supreme Court against a fellow judge, Justice Qazi Faez Isa. In February 2019, Justice Isa had [issued a judgement](#) in the [Faizabad sit-in case](#) against the surreptitious role of Pakistan’s [top intelligence agency](#) in arranging protests – by [mobilising religiously-fanatical people](#) and [aiding them monetarily](#) – against a sitting government to make it fall. In retaliation, the intelligence agency [cooked up a case](#) against Justice Isa in an effort to eject him from the panel of the Supreme Court. The fellow judges heard the case for almost one year and acknowledged the existence of [dubious content in the allegations](#) but shied away from offering Justice Isa full relief. The outcome of the case still [hangs in the balance](#) but the acquiescence of the judges to the intelligence agency dismayed all those who wanted to see a fair and prompt outcome.

As a judge of the Supreme Court, Justice Isa is known for his [integrity and bold decisions](#) that spare no centre of power. In his decisions, he produces legal and logical reasons that convince the reader of his erudition. He is also known for his [intrepid pro-democratic penchants](#). Those attributes make him a thorn in the flesh of people and organisations that seek to impose the China model of governance on Pakistanis without their consent. In the eyes of [Pakistan’s top spy agency](#), supported by the Pakistani Army, both Justice Qazi Faez Isa and Matiullah Jan defy the tenets of controlled society and structured consent, and hence must be held responsible for their actions.

Pakistan’s media and society are divided between those who support the principles of Justice Isa and those who are pitted against them. Pro-democracy Pakistanis stand by Justice Isa and, by extension, support Matiullah Jan. As they see it, the major objective of kidnapping Matiullah Jan was to make him absent from appearing before Chief Justice of Pakistan, Justice Gulzar Ahmed, who had taken [a suo moto \[on its own motion\] notice](#) against a tweet from Matiullah Jan that criticised the capitulation of the judges to the

pressure of the spy agency. The journalist's absence from the [contempt of court](#) hearing on 22 July was designed to unleash hostile a section of the media against him, thereby damaging his reputation and making him appear inconsequential. The CCTV footage that showed his apprehension was followed by vociferous reaction from the pro-Justice Isa school of thought and the [pro-free media sections of society](#). These entities placed unprecedented pressure on the Imran Khan government to intervene and ensure the release of Matiullah Jan. The journalist was bold enough, however, to [issue the details of his enforced disappearance](#) – a phenomenon not uncommon in Pakistan – through a video clip uploaded on 24 July on his [YouTube channel](#), MJ TV.

He informed the viewers of the manner in which he was handcuffed, blindfolded, transported, locked up and battered, besides being reprovved for what he did as a reporter. In the lock-up, where he was blindfolded and handcuffed, the kidnappers warned him in no uncertain terms that if he did not cease his unfavourable reports, his children would be harmed. That was a grave threat to the reporter, who was being asked to compromise his professional ethics for the safety of his family. Moreover, the warning indicated that the kidnappers had conducted surveillance of the reporter's family as well. Compounding the issue, other than taking [superficial measures](#), no authority – local or national – appears to be interested in apprehending the kidnappers, who are visible on the CCTV footages. It is understandable that the culprits will never be brought to justice. The State of Pakistan, it appears, is complaisant to the hidden powers that are in actual control.

There are four major methods applied to suppress journalists. First, apprehend and torture them to death, as happened in the case of [Syed Saleem Shahzad](#) in May 2011. Second, assail journalists by shooting them in the lower half of their bodies to make them suffer greatly without actually killing the victim, as happened in the case of [Hamid Mir](#) in April 2014. Third, kidnap a journalist and subject that individual to torture in an attempt to discourage unfavourable reporting, as happened in the case of [Matiullah Jan](#) in July 2020. Fourth, physically attack a journalist and leave that individual's body mauled and badly maimed by unknown attackers, tacitly stating that the beating could recur in the future if the journalist continued to annoy the authorities.

Matiullah Jan was lucky that his apprehension was recorded on CCTV. It transpired that, on 21 July, the kidnappers had waited for him some distance from the school where, after dropping his wife, he sat in his car for more than an hour reading some documents. That was unusual for him. Losing their patience, the kidnappers felt something was amiss and rushed to the school to abduct him, which was why they were recorded on the CCTV cameras. That was the turning point in the whole episode. The original plan probably was to apprehend him in some other street on his way to the Supreme Court. Had there had been no CCTV cameras outside the school or the kidnapping event not been recorded, Mr Jan's life would likely have been jeopardised.

While the Pakistani [print and electronic media](#) are virtually [controlled by](#) Pakistan's intelligence community, social media is not and became a platform for discussing for the fate of the missing reporter. That was the second factor that saved the life of Matiullah Jan. There are moves, however, to [ban social media](#) in Pakistan, likely via a court order. Retired

Pakistani Army generals and brigadiers dominate the country's print and electronic media, including on TV talk shows, to push their opinions on the readers and viewers, construct a pro-military narrative and promote the China model of governance under the ruse that a hybrid war or a [battle](#) of narratives is being waged. They, the self-proclaimed champions of the war of narratives, have created their own reasons to assert their narrative over those of others.

Over the years, owing to issuing political decisions and yielding to the pressure of intelligence agencies, Pakistan's judiciary has lost its credibility. This is why judges like Justice Isa are considered a ray of hope and this is why journalists like Matiullah Jan are held in high esteem in Pakistani society.

Understandably, the Supreme Court was under pressure from certain quarters to take action against Matiullah Jan's [rebellious tweet](#). The Chief Justice of Pakistan, Justice Gulzar Ahmed, succumbed to the pressure and performed the unprecedented act of taking a *suo moto* notice on a tweet. That point alone indicates the existence of a compromised higher judiciary that dances to the tune of its puppet masters. In Pakistan, there is a history of judges being blackmailed by the country's intelligence agencies. For instance, on 11 November 2007, the UK's *Sunday Times* published a story that alleged that some of Pakistan's [Supreme Court judges](#) had been [sexually blackmailed](#) to force them to legitimise General Pervez Musharraf's decision to run for the office of president while remaining the army chief. The newspaper revealed that the country's feared military intelligence made films to influence the judges' decision.

Under the China model of governance, which has become more discernible after 2014, there could be absolutely no tolerance of defiance. Disagreement, under that model, amounts to insolence, which incurs the rage of the dominant, who are armed with weapons bought with public money and who run dungeons to imprison dissenters for years. According to that model, all tongues should be stilled, lips sealed and eyes closed. People may hear of various issues but they cannot cross the red lines that are set, not by the Constitution of Pakistan, but by Pakistan's top spy agency.

Pakistan has finally reached the crescendo where even the [tweets of journalists merit](#) a *suo moto* action by the Supreme Court. This is an example of the way Pakistan's highest court exposes itself to [public ridicule and wrath](#). If one tweet of a journalist can move the Supreme Court to shift its attention from the thousands of pending court cases in order to penalise the journalist, one hundred tweets could, perhaps, bring down the whole judicial system. It is a pity to see the Supreme Court allowing itself to be influenced by a mere tweet by a journalist and seeking to punish him for it. Apparently one honest tweet is more potent than one hundred pages of flimsy judgement. The *suo moto* notice can only be seen as a ploy to demonise the journalist and expose him to maltreatment by the spy agency.

Pakistan is an established democracy underpinned by a Constitution. [Frequent military dictatorships](#) coupled with their [long spells spanning decades](#) have dented democracy, mutilated the Constitution and ruined the normal lives of people. The current headache wracking Pakistanis is the China model of governance. Deviants are inspired by that model.

Pakistan needs judges like Justice Qazi Faez Isa and journalists like Matiullah Jan to bring Pakistan back to the path of democracy, constitutional supremacy and normality.

In this interconnected globalised world, the international community, which promotes free speech and upholds human liberties, cannot sit idle and remain silent. Pro-democratic Pakistanis fear that a terrible future awaits them. Many journalists, who today uphold free speech, democracy, constitutionalism and human freedom, may vanish in a short while. Pakistan is running out of time. This article must be seen as an appeal to the international community to play its role in saving Pakistan from sliding further into the morass of the China model of Procrustean governance.

About the Author: Dr Qaisar Rashid is a Lahore-based freelance writer who has contributed a weekly column for 15 years to various English language dailies in Pakistan.

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