

# GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2011

INTERNET RIGHTS AND DEMOCRATISATION

*Focus on freedom of expression and association online*



*This edition of Global Information Society Watch is dedicated to the people of the Arab revolutions whose courage in the face of violence and repression reminded the world that people working together for change have the power to claim the rights they are entitled to.*

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# PAKISTAN

## FIGHTING FOR HUMAN RIGHTS IN BALOCHISTAN ONLINE



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### Introduction

Sprawling, mineral-rich Balochistan is the largest province of Pakistan and constitutes approximately 44% of the country's total land mass. The official population estimate of Balochistan was approximately 6.51 million as per the 1998 census.<sup>1</sup> Bordering Afghanistan and Iran, the province is however the least developed on all possible socioeconomic indicators. It has Pakistan's weakest growth record, worst infrastructure, greatest water crisis, and weakest fiscal base. Poor economic performance over the years has led to poor living standards and a high poverty rate. Access to information and communications technologies (ICTs) is low and parts of the province have the weakest state institutions. Decades of under-investment have earned Balochistan a reputation of being a backward region riddled with conflicts, distant from Pakistan's economic hubs, with a life burdened by the toils of the fields and rangelands and tribal disputes, rather than a hub of activity surrounding world-class mining explorations, modern trade links, sustainable agriculture and boasting an empowered community.

Over the last decade, Balochistan has been locked down under a state of information quarantine due to an ongoing military operation against Baloch nationalists – called insurgents by the military and media in Pakistan. Newspaper reports from Balochistan are buried quietly on the inside pages, cloaked in euphemisms or, quite often, not published at all.<sup>2</sup> Amnesty International reports that the disappearance, illegal detention, torture and extra-judicial killings of journalists, lawyers, students and political activists have increased rapidly throughout Balochistan in recent months, with an almost total blackout on these grie-

some incidents by the Pakistani media.<sup>3</sup> Due to the information blackout and the national media neglecting coverage of Balochistan issues, the role of the internet in advocacy against human rights abuses and as a tool of social resistance has become very popular.

### Separatist identity

Baloch nationalists claim that the Baloch people, an ethno-linguistic group mainly found in Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan, are a different nation – the reason for their demand for a separate state – whereas Pakistan's government strongly takes this demand as a threat to "national security".<sup>4</sup>

In recent years many Baloch voices raising the issue of Baloch nationalism have been permanently silenced. The result has been 8,000 missing persons<sup>5</sup> and countless bullet-riddled bodies; thousands of people have "disappeared"<sup>6</sup> since the nationalist movement began to expand. In 2006, the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) issued a 340-page report stating that a large number of persons – a number growing at an "alarming rate" – have been picked up by intelligence agencies and taken for detention in secret locations.<sup>7</sup> Relatives never get an explanation of why someone is taken, but the families of the missing persons strongly believe that intelligence agencies and the army are involved in the detention of the Baloch nationalist leaders.<sup>8</sup>

Cognisant of the fact that the power of mainstream media helps form public opinion, the government does all it can to ensure that there is no major exposure of the incidents happening in Balochistan. No doubt journalists are also concerned for their physical safety. Yet the main obstacle to general

1 The official website of Government of Balochistan: [www.balochistan.gov.pk/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=category&sectionid=4&id=42&Itemid=486](http://www.balochistan.gov.pk/index.php?option=com_content&task=category&sectionid=4&id=42&Itemid=486)

2 Walsh, D. (2001) Pakistan's secret dirty war, *The Guardian*, 9 July. [www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/mar/29/balochistan-pakistans-secret-dirty-war](http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/mar/29/balochistan-pakistans-secret-dirty-war)

3 Tatchell, P. (2011) Pakistan: Secret, dirty killings in Balochistan, *Daily Times*, 9 July. [www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2011%5C07%5C09%5Cstory\\_9-7-2011\\_pg7\\_24](http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2011%5C07%5C09%5Cstory_9-7-2011_pg7_24)

4 [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Balochistan\\_conflict](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Balochistan_conflict)

5 Fisk, R. (2010) Into the terrifying world of Pakistan's 'disappeared', *The Independent*, 18 March. [www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/fisk/robert-fisk-into-the-terrifying-world-of-pakistans-disappeared-1923153.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/fisk/robert-fisk-into-the-terrifying-world-of-pakistans-disappeared-1923153.html)

6 [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Missing\\_persons\\_%28Pakistan%29](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Missing_persons_%28Pakistan%29)

7 Asian Human Rights Commission (2006) *Pakistan: The Human Rights Situation in 2006*. [material.ahrchk.net/hrreport/2006/Pakistan2006.pdf](http://material.ahrchk.net/hrreport/2006/Pakistan2006.pdf)

8 Asian Human Rights Commission (2011) Army officers acknowledged that a disappeared person was in their custody but the courts failed to recover him, *AHRC News*, 25 January. [www.humanrights.asia/news/ahrc-news/AHRC-STM-014-2011](http://www.humanrights.asia/news/ahrc-news/AHRC-STM-014-2011)

awareness comes from the mainstream media's compliance with the state's twin policies of collective silence about state-perpetrated acts against ordinary Baloch people, and of glossing over the intensity of the acrimony that has arisen in the Baloch people against the Pakistani state and its ruling elite.<sup>9</sup>

A growing number of literate individuals in Balochistan and the diaspora have realised that it is no use relying on mainstream media to put across their point of view – nor is there any point complaining about the lack of coverage of Baloch issues in the national media. Instead, they have increasingly started using the internet as an open and (relatively) un-suppressed means of communication. Technology has given them the means to take matters into their own hands, taking control of the telling of their own narrative and bypassing the mainstream media, whose primary loyalty seems to be a misguided determination to defend what they are told is the “national interest”, rather than seeking out the truth.<sup>10</sup>

Despite the fact that Balochistan is Pakistan's least-developed province, with a low population and an even lower literacy rate, it has amazingly become home to the most successful use of the internet as a tool for advocacy, driving social and political discourse for human rights and democracy.

We have witnessed the emergence of a substantial number of online Baloch newspapers, blogs and video-sharing channels in the last couple of years. With the spread of the internet in every district of Balochistan (further facilitated by the spread of mobile phones), the Baloch nationalist movement experienced an unprecedented change and activists started communicating via the internet to a far greater extent.

In 2006, the government took advantage of a Supreme Court ruling which called for the blocking of all blasphemous internet content accessible in Pakistan. This ruling was seized on as the excuse for a crackdown on Baloch websites<sup>11</sup> by a government that was already furious about the use of the internet by political activists in the region. The government blocked several Baloch websites<sup>12</sup> using its controls over the internet and the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority, which turned out to be the worst predator of internet rights in Pakistan.<sup>13</sup>

9 Arshed, N. (2011) Cautious and selective, *The News*, 6 June. [www.jang.com.pk/thenews/jun2011-weekly/nos-12-06-2011/spr.htm#3](http://www.jang.com.pk/thenews/jun2011-weekly/nos-12-06-2011/spr.htm#3)

10 Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (2011) Balochistan: Little Coverage in Mainsream Media, 24 June. [www.unpo.org/article/12798](http://www.unpo.org/article/12798)

11 [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Internet\\_censorship\\_in\\_Pakistan](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Internet_censorship_in_Pakistan)

12 Pakistan banned websites in country, 10 August 2006. [www.frihost.com/forums/vt-48590.html](http://www.frihost.com/forums/vt-48590.html)

13 Pakistan 451 (2006) PTA letter blocking websites, 25 April. [pakistan451.wordpress.com/2006/04/27/pta-letter-blocking-websites-april-25-06](http://pakistan451.wordpress.com/2006/04/27/pta-letter-blocking-websites-april-25-06)

Social media services such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube now supplement existing national and international news channels like CNN, BBC and Fox News in an era of new citizen journalism and activism. Both Twitter and Facebook, for example, have been playing a vital role in forming public opinion at the local level as well. These days we find numerous Baloch activists publishing information about the real picture of atrocities committed by government agencies and the army in their region; the activists' primary tool is, increasingly, social media.

While activists have been posting shocking videos of army human rights violations in Balochistan on YouTube and elsewhere, when these are uploaded they are quickly blocked by the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority, as it is within their policy framework to immediately remove content that is deemed abusive of the Pakistani army or against the “national interest”. In 2010, some particularly graphic videos of human rights abuses were circulated on the internet. In one such video, filmed on a mobile phone camera, Pakistani soldiers are seen brutally killing a number of teenage boys and prisoners.<sup>14</sup> Foreign media<sup>15</sup> picked up the story and spread it all over the world. The Pakistani army's response was to deny the authenticity of the video and claim that it was faked by militants.<sup>16</sup> But one local told Human Rights Watch: “On February 16, 2010, the army shot all four dead in the area of the Grid Station in the town. We heard the shots that killed these individuals.”<sup>17</sup>

As a result of the rise and visibility of the Pakistani army's human rights violations communicated through online videos, the United States (US) State Department and Pentagon decided to cut aid to a half dozen Pakistani army units believed to have killed civilians and unarmed prisoners in different parts of the country, including Balochistan.<sup>18</sup>

Another recent video which has damaged the country's reputation – once again at the international level – was the killing of five Chechen women

14 Perlez, J. (2010) Video Hints at Executions by Pakistanis, *The New York Times*, 29 September. [www.nytimes.com/2010/09/30/world/asia/30pstan.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/30/world/asia/30pstan.html)

15 FRANCE 24 Web News (2010) An online video accusing the Pakistan army of extrajudicial killings, 13 October. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=oPto\\_4NXnUA&feature=fvwrel](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oPto_4NXnUA&feature=fvwrel)

16 Al Jazeera and agencies (2010) Pakistan army to investigate video, *Al Jazeera*, 8 October. [english.aljazeera.net/news/asia/2010/10/20101087424786823.html](http://english.aljazeera.net/news/asia/2010/10/20101087424786823.html)

17 Human Rights Watch (2010) Pakistan: Extrajudicial Executions by Army in Swat, 16 July. [www.hrw.org/en/news/2010/07/16/pakistan-extrajudicial-executions-army-swat](http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2010/07/16/pakistan-extrajudicial-executions-army-swat)

18 Schmitt, E. and Sanger, D. (2010) Pakistani Troops Linked to Abuses Will Lose Aid, *The New York Times*, 21 October. [www.nytimes.com/2010/10/22/world/asia/22policy.html?\\_r=1&scp=1&sq=pakistan%20aid&st=cse](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/22/world/asia/22policy.html?_r=1&scp=1&sq=pakistan%20aid&st=cse)

by officers at the Balochistan border. Video footage captured by local residents showed that unarmed foreign nationals were shot over and over again as they lay on the ground pleading for help. Contrary to initial claims by the police and border control officers, there were no suicide jackets in the vehicle and no other explosive items were found.<sup>19</sup> Another report revealed that the shooting happened after the Chechen women turned down a demand for sexual favours by the police and border control officers.<sup>20</sup> One of the women killed was seven months pregnant.<sup>21</sup> When the government failed to take any action regarding the killings, Pakistan's Supreme Court had to finally initiate a *suo moto* action.<sup>22</sup>

Gone are the days when the voice of the masses, a populist movement or an uprising could be hushed or silenced by the authorities. The advent of the internet and social media in particular has changed the rules of the game altogether. We have witnessed the recent revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt and the Middle East, where despite government attempts at censorship and information control, news has spread rapidly and directly from the front lines of citizen activism to a worldwide online audience.

The most popular "Balochistan" page on Facebook has a following of thousands of individuals, which by any standard or stretch of the imagination is significant. When one also takes into account the low literacy rate in the province and the volatile law and order situation, such a public display of opposition against the repression is all the more remarkable. Baloch youths and political activists/workers have formed several Facebook groups and pages, where they share pictures of the missing Baloch people.

Now it takes no time to upload the photos of the so-called "killed and dumped" for a worldwide audience on Facebook, while newspapers still refuse to publish and circulate pictures of slain Balochistan activists.<sup>23</sup> Ironically, they fear the retribution of the state, when these images are already available

online. The great strength of social media is that they provide an instant, self-organising medium in which young, lively and outspoken political activists can immediately report local news and information and publish for a worldwide online cyber community.

### Dangerous development

In response to this situation, there has been a disturbing development. Since 2007, the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority has been using the sophisticated technology and services of a company called Narus which has the ability to spy on internet and mobile phone users using deep packet inspection (DPI), which allows them to read content in real time. This company has not only aided repressive regimes like Egypt's (which is known to have attempted a blanket cut-off of all internet communications this year) but also provides its services to other repressive regimes notorious for online censorship, such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, Libya and China.<sup>24</sup>

Even so, Baloch Facebookers and Tweeples have an advantage over a government which is increasingly frightened of adverse international attention on its domestic policies. In today's climate, attempting to restrict freedom of expression in the face of the power of social media is not only technically difficult, it is also bound to be seen and widely reported. For the government, as much as for the individual citizen, the internet offers nowhere to hide.

### Action steps

From a Pakistani perspective, it is an established fact that cyberspace is the next big frontier and the war on civil rights will be fought via the internet and using digital tools. This is why it is important for the world community to continue to:

- Support internet freedom in repressive regimes
- Strengthen the capacities of human rights activists working on digital security
- Raise awareness about internet rights and principles among the general public
- Promote the effective participation of women and other marginalised segments of society in the policy processes relating to digital rights
- Inculcate and strengthen the human rights agenda in cyberspace. ■

19 Baloch, S. (2011) Chechen suspects were not wearing suicide vests, police confirm, *The Express Tribune*, 19 May. [tribune.com.pk/story/171770/chechen-suspects-were-not-wearing-suicide-vests-police-confirm](http://tribune.com.pk/story/171770/chechen-suspects-were-not-wearing-suicide-vests-police-confirm)

20 The Express Tribune (n/d) Chechen women "terrorists" refused sexual advances: PTI (video). [tribune.com.pk/multimedia/videos/173812](http://tribune.com.pk/multimedia/videos/173812)

21 Baloch, S. (2011) Chechen 'terrorist' was pregnant when shot dead, *The Express Tribune*, 20 May. [tribune.com.pk/story/172557/chechen-terrorist-was-pregnant-when-shot-dead](http://tribune.com.pk/story/172557/chechen-terrorist-was-pregnant-when-shot-dead)

22 Baloch, S. (2011) Kharotabad incident: Judicial inquiry into Chechens' killing ordered, *The Express Tribune*, 21 May. [tribune.com.pk/story/173082/kharotabad-incident-judicial-inquiry-into-chechens-killing-ordered](http://tribune.com.pk/story/173082/kharotabad-incident-judicial-inquiry-into-chechens-killing-ordered)

23 Akbar, M. S. (2011) Taking social media by storm, *Crisis Balochistan*, 18 June. [www.crisisbalochistan.com/secondary\\_menu/global-issues-development/general-development/taking-social-media-by-storm.html](http://www.crisisbalochistan.com/secondary_menu/global-issues-development/general-development/taking-social-media-by-storm.html)

24 Karr, T. (2011) One U.S. Corporation's Role in Egypt's Brutal Crackdown, *Crisis Balochistan*, 28 January. [www.crisisbalochistan.com/secondary\\_menu/news/how-pakistan-monitors-net-traffic.html](http://www.crisisbalochistan.com/secondary_menu/news/how-pakistan-monitors-net-traffic.html)

In the year of the Arab uprisings **GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2011** investigates how governments and internet and mobile phone companies are trying to restrict freedom online – and how citizens are responding to this using the very same technologies.

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2011 Report

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