

## In London, echoes of Pakistan's deadly press policies

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Among the more 200,000 Pakistanis living in London is Altaf Hussain, leader of the Muttahida Qaumi Movement. This powerful political party is widely thought to be behind the murder of reporter [Wali Khan Babar](#), a rising star at Geo TV who was shot dead in Karachi in 2011. His coverage focused on politically sensitive topics such as extortion, targeted killings, electricity thefts, land-grabbing, and riots.

Police arrested several suspects affiliated with the MQM, but the investigation into Babar's death fell apart when five people connected to the investigation--witnesses and law enforcement officials--were systematically murdered, one by one. The two original prosecutors were threatened and forced to flee the country.

The brutality of the Babar case was highlighted during a [discussion](#) in London on Friday of CPJ's special report, [Roots of Impunity](#), which examined the unsolved murders of 23 Pakistani journalists over the past decade. The discussion, at Chatham House, featured the report's author, Elizabeth Rubin, and the Pakistani author and CPJ board member, Ahmed Rashid.

In Pakistan, the fear is such that journalists will not go on the record to speak about the MQM, Rubin said. She described a cycle of violence and impunity where journalists are targeted not only by militants, criminals, and warlords, but also by political, military, and intelligence operatives.

"They are caught in an undeclared war between the U.S. and Pakistan, or between the different factions in the country ... and until that is resolved, they will continue to pay," Rubin said.

Hostilities against journalists are nothing new in Pakistan. Rashid described the journalist imprisonments of past generations as having evolved into the targeted killings of today. At the same time, a traditionally weak civil society has forced the media to take on a primary role in investigating and denouncing social ills and official misdeeds. Journalists "are bribed, cajoled, threatened and ultimately even killed," said Rashid, who noted that the "war on terror" has left Pakistani authorities free to act with impunity against the press.

The root of the problem, Rashid said, is the government's dual policy of allowing the Taliban and other militant groups to operate freely even as they take part in international efforts to stem terrorism. This has given the Pakistani military and intelligence services an unlimited mandate with no accountability.

The issue extends beyond Pakistan's borders. Hussain's speeches from London are broadcast in full throughout Pakistan, Rashid said, who expressed dismay at "the stunning silence of the British government" regarding the MQM's violent activities and its involvement in the killing of Babar.

Rubin and Rashid expressed hope as Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif shapes a new agenda. The most important steps the government can take, said Rashid, are to reopen the cases of journalists killed with impunity and to make public the undisclosed investigative reports into those killings. One such report involves the killing of [Hayatullah Khan](#), a freelance journalist who was kidnapped and found dead in 2006 after receiving threats from Pakistani security forces, Taliban members, and local tribesmen. The day before his abduction, Khan had photographed the remnants of a U.S. missile believed to have killed a senior Al-Qaeda figure, an image that contradicted Pakistan's official accounts of the killing.

Rashid and Rubin said local media owners have a responsibility for journalist safety, but advertising and political pressures make it difficult for them to act in unison. The government can take the lead. The passage of access to information legislation and the lifting of a ban on YouTube, for example, would improve the overall environment.

"It would be great if the government could do something on its own initiative and not by being beaten over the head," said Rashid, who pointed to the [U.N. Inter-Agency Plan of Action for the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity](#) as an opportunity to combat impunity and improve journalist safety. Pakistan is among the five nations where the plan is being initially deployed. CPJ is part of a [broad alliance](#) promoting the plan in Pakistan.