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Artists and Activists See Tighter Controls on Expression in Pakistan

Authorities are cracking down on free speech, they say; art installation is shut down

Workers removed tombstones that were part of Adeela Suleman's exhibit at Frere Hall in Karachi, Pakistan, Oct. 29, 2019. FAREED KHAN/ASSOCIATED PRESS

By Bill Spindle

No sooner had Pakistani artist Adeela Suleman's exhibit opened at the Karachi Biennale last week than she had an encounter that artists, writers, journalists and activists say has become common under the current government: It was shut down.

Her installation, a work that referenced the case of a police officer accused of being behind more than 400 murders and assassinations, was then wrecked and carted off in a truck.

Pakistani authorities are cracking down on free speech, a move critics say reflects a renewed authoritarianism driven by the military but veiled with the veneer of an elected government.

Criticism of national-security issues and coverage of the political opposition has all but disappeared from news broadcasts as a result of pressure and guidance from the media regulator and security officials, according to local journalists.



Ms. Suleman's installation at the Karachi Biennale before it was destroyed. PHOTO: ADEELA SULEMAN

At a literary festival earlier this year, four critics of the military say they were barred from speaking after authorities approached the organizers. Last year, the government expelled 18 international nongovernmental organizations, including several American ones.

Last month, a representative from the Committee to Protect Journalists, an international free-press advocacy group, was refused entry to the country when he arrived to attend a human-rights conference, even though he had been granted a visa. A report by the committee last year found that “the military and other powerful institutions have established lines of control to stifle the press.”

Authorities also have actively attempted to get social media such as Facebook and Twitter to include political content in the types of posts they remove as a matter of policy, such as blasphemy, the companies say.

Nawaz Sharif, the leader of the main opposition party in parliament, has been in jail for over a year, leaving a party that was once a vocal public critic of the military almost silent. In the past few weeks Mr. Sharif was hospitalized for a medical condition.

Democracy was restored in Pakistan a decade ago, ending the most recent run of military rule in a country where dictatorship has dominated half its history. After initially allowing more freedoms after 2008, the army is now rolling these back, human rights activists, artists, opposition politicians and others say. The moves come after the military clashed with the press and the former government of Mr. Sharif.



Former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, leaving a court in Lahore on Oct. 11, has been in prison for over a year, leaving the main opposition party almost silent. PHOTO: RAHAT DAR/EPA/SHUTTERSTOCK

Prime Minister Imran Khan, elected last year, has said he is on the “same page” as the military, giving the armed forces even more leeway behind the scenes, critics say. Mr. Khan, after a meeting with President Trump in Washington, said Pakistan’s media is “freer than the British media.”

But critics accuse Mr. Khan’s government and the military of working together to scrub criticism out of public life, from cultural festivals and protests to news outlets and

conferences.

They say critical expression is more restricted than during the military rule of Gen. Pervez Musharraf, who came to power in a coup in 1999. His administration tolerated widespread harsh public criticism until its last days in office in 2008, when it shut down media outlets altogether in a last-ditch attempt to retain power.

“Now we have a performance of democracy, but not actual democracy,” said Ammar Ali Jan, a professor at Lahore’s Forman Christian College, and one of the banned speakers at the literary festival. “Unlike a dictatorship, no one knows where the red lines are. Every space is a battleground.”

Organizers left empty chairs on the stage where the panelists would have been seated.

The military didn’t respond to inquiries about the biennale or restrictions on free expression. The military denies it had any role in banning speakers at the literary festival. Privately, some active and retired military officials say they fear public criticism would open social cleavages. They often accuse critics of being influenced or sponsored by foreigners.



Prime Minister Imran Khan has said Pakistan’s media is ‘freer than the British media.’ PHOTO: AAMIR QURESHI/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

The military’s spokesman, Maj. Gen. Asif Ghafoor, after meeting the head of the television regulator earlier this year, said in a statement that they “discussed measures to facilitate Pakistani media in projecting positive image and narrative of Pakistan while effectively countering anti-Pakistan narrative at play through certain foreign media/inimical forces.”

Ms. Suleman’s ordeal at the Karachi Biennale began almost immediately after the public was admitted to see it. The exhibit included a film and paintings indoors. In an outdoor courtyard of the historic municipal building she placed 444 facsimiles of tombstones, each with a wilted metal flower.



Pakistan's military spokesman, Maj. Gen. Asif Ghafoor, said he and the head of the television regulator discussed 'countering anti-Pakistan narrative.' PHOTO: ANJUM NAVEED/ASSOCIATED PRESS

The work referred to the number of murders and assassinations a local police officer has been accused of being involved in as part of a high-profile trial. The officer, who is being tried, has denied the charges. One of the killings he is accused of carrying out—that of a man from the Pashtun ethnic minority—sparked a protest movement that has harshly and openly criticized the military, alleging human-rights abuses.

Earlier this year, the military opened fire on unarmed protesters from the movement, killing more than a dozen, in scenes that were filmed on cellphones. The military said the protesters were storming a checkpoint. The authorities have brought terrorism charges against two leaders of the group—both of them elected members of parliament

Soon after the doors to her exhibit opened on Oct. 27, Ms. Suleman, who teaches at a local university,

said two men came and, without identifying themselves, told the organizers to close the indoor part of her exhibit, which they did.

She said the men also told her to remove the tombstones in the courtyard. Ms. Suleman ignored the order.



Ms. Suleman said workers picked up the broken pieces of her artwork and drove away with them. PHOTO: /FAREED KHAN/ASSOCIATED PRESS

The next morning, one of her students arrived to find the tombstones toppled and some of them broken. They set them back up. But by the time a group of artists and activists arrived in the late afternoon to support Ms. Suleman, the tombstones were toppled and broken again. The group set them up again.

The following morning, she said, she and her students arrived to find all the tombstones broken and scattered yet again. Then a truck arrived with workers who picked up the broken pieces and drove away with them, she and others involved said.

The organizers of the biennale issued a public statement saying that Ms. Suleman's exhibit was removed because its political message didn't fit with the show's theme of ecology and the natural environment. That elicited an angry public letter criticizing the biennale organizers, signed by more than 150 artists and activists, which asserted that "we cannot support a biennale that seeks to divorce artmaking from politics."

Organizers declined to comment beyond the statement.

During a news conference called by artists and activists, an official from the Karachi metropolitan parks agency, which manages the building and grounds the biennale is using for the exhibition, arrived unannounced and told the group the installation was removed because political messages were prohibited under the agreement to allow the biennale to use the facility.

"This is not art. This is vandalism," the official, the director general of parks, Afaq Mirza, told the reporters and activists in a video later posted on social media. "Why are you presenting a bad picture of Pakistan?"

When someone asked for the identity of the men who initially came to close down the exhibit, Mr. Mirza caused an uproar when he responded that he believed they were representatives of the local corps of the military.

Mr. Mirza didn't respond to requests for comment.

—*Waqar Gillani contributed to this article.*

Corrections & Amplifications

Ammar Ali Jan is a professor at Forman Christian College. An earlier version of this article incorrectly spelled the name of the college.