



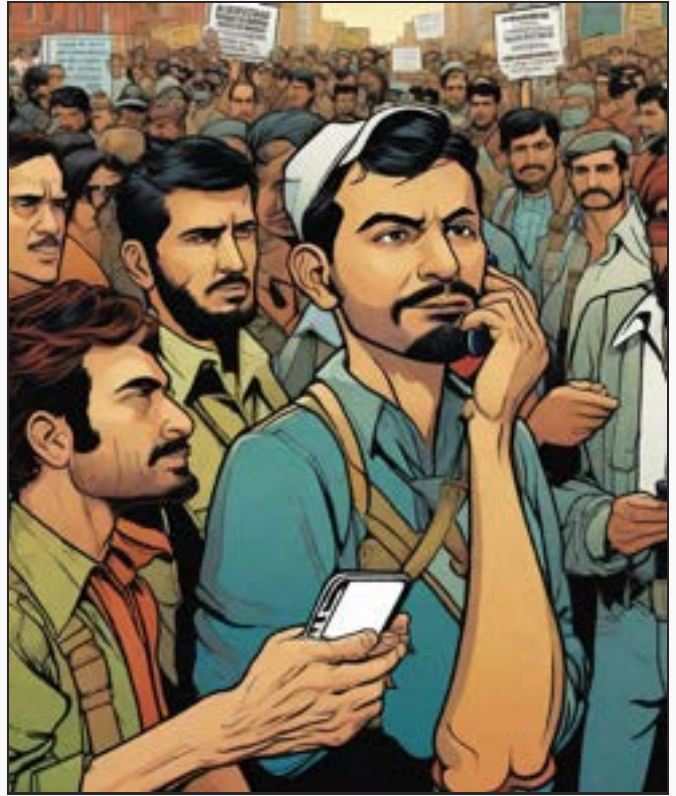
Silenced Echoes: Journalists' Struggle in Pakistan

Authors' Note

This story draws inspiration from recent events in Pakistan, notably the riots on May 9, 2023, and the elections on February 8, 2024. While the narrative incorporates fictionalized elements for storytelling purposes, it remains grounded in the core themes of governmental cloudy policies, civil rights advocacy, and journalistic integrity, reflecting the complex socio-political dynamics of the region during this tumultuous period.

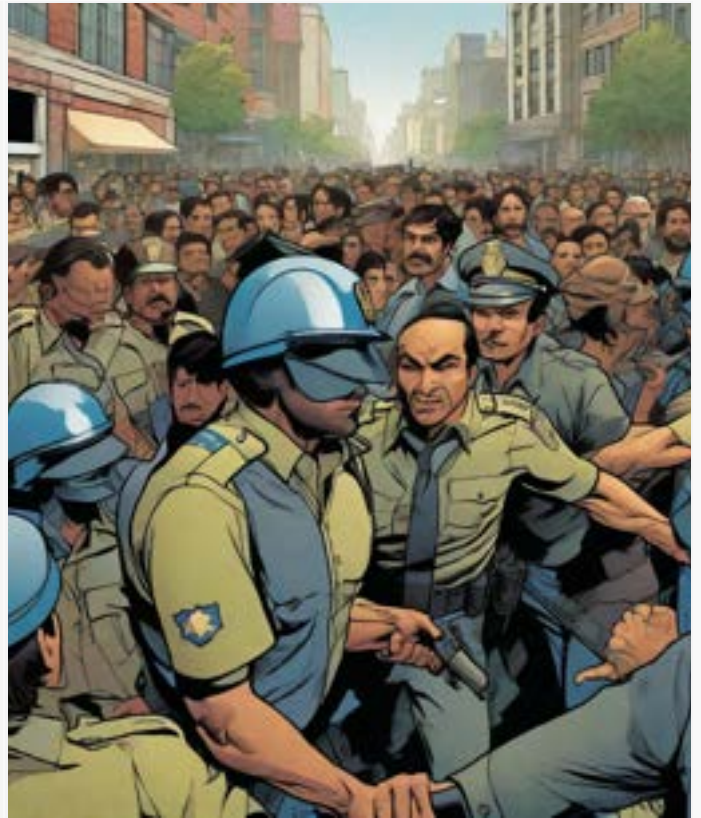
Throughout this time, local police detained numerous protesters for their participation in rallies and protests, while journalists faced arbitrary arrests followed by interrogations for covering stories on such events.

While this story is centered around the protests in Islamabad, the experiences of the fictional journalist characters resonate with journalists across Pakistan facing similar challenges. Due to a similar development background, the term "state-sponsored apps" instead of the three government-sponsored apps, the Pak Identity app, the Pakistan Citizen Portal app, and the Qeemat Punjab app, have been used in the story.

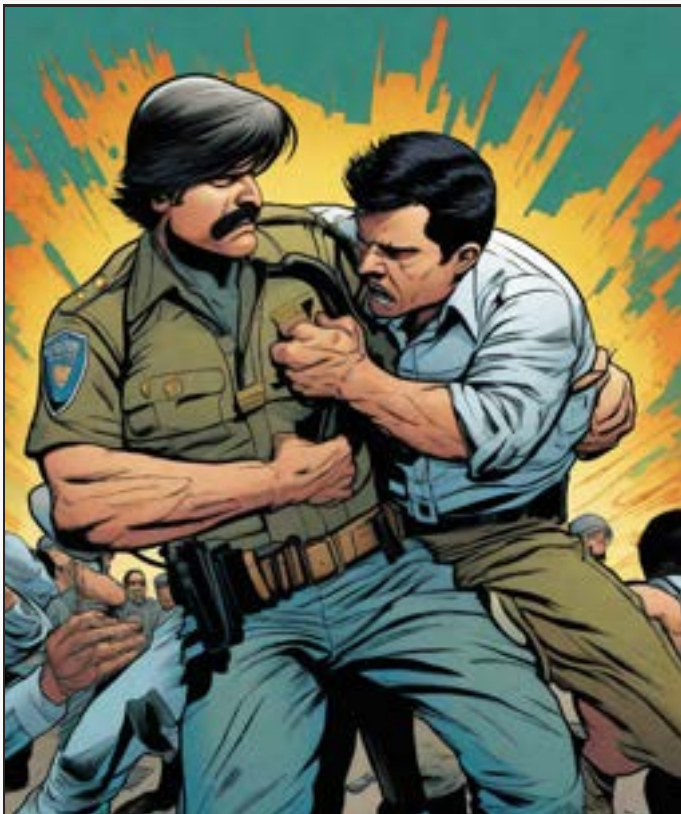
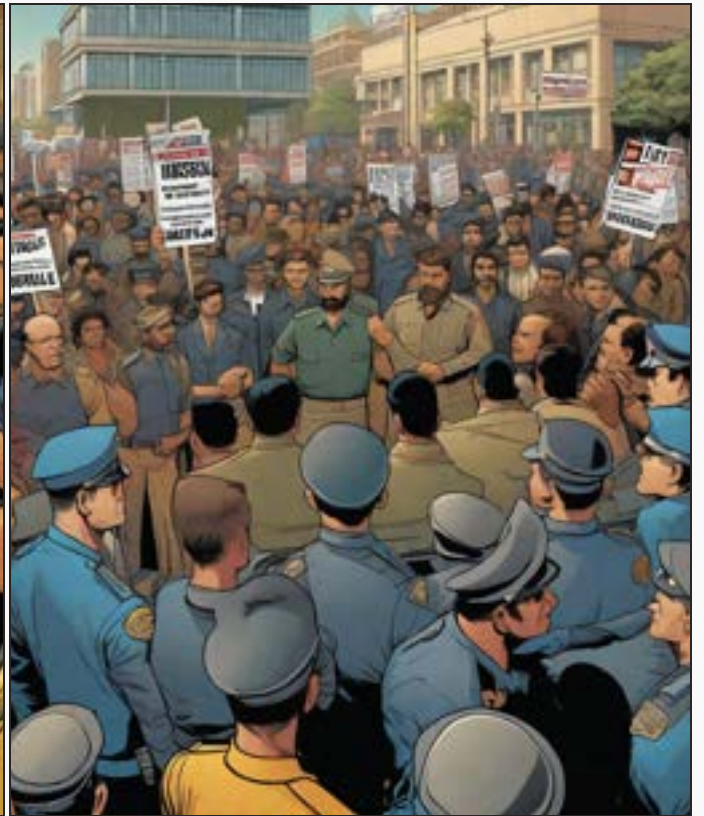


On a brisk February 12th, 2024, just four days after the contentious election results had stirred uproar, Hammad, Hassan, Saad, Ali, and Hamid found themselves thrust into the eye of a tumultuous storm in Islamabad, Pakistan. Renowned as pillars of civil society, these five journalists were not merely reporters but fierce advocates for transparency and justice.

Amidst hundreds of impassioned Pakistani citizens gathered in protest against alleged electoral rigging, these five journalists stood poised with their mobile phones and cameras, ready to document the unfolding drama. The air hummed with fervor as slogans reverberated off the government buildings that encircled the square. It was a pivotal moment that would underscore their relentless campaign against corruption and staunch defense of freedom of speech.

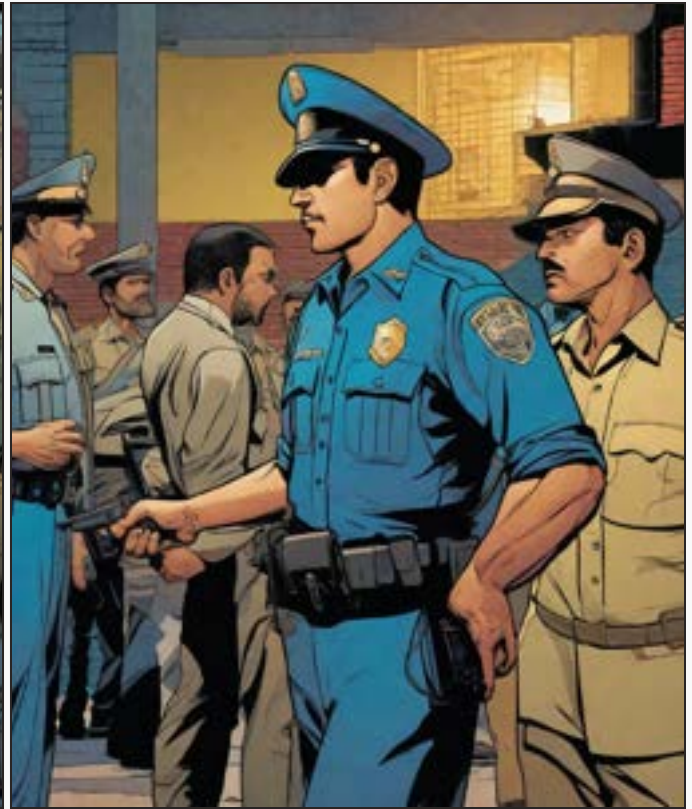


The situation took a tense turn as these journalists tirelessly documented the unfolding events. Hundreds of local police officers descended upon the scene, igniting a palpable tension among the protesters. Intimidation tactics ensued as officers attempted to control the swelling crowd, heightening the already charged atmosphere.



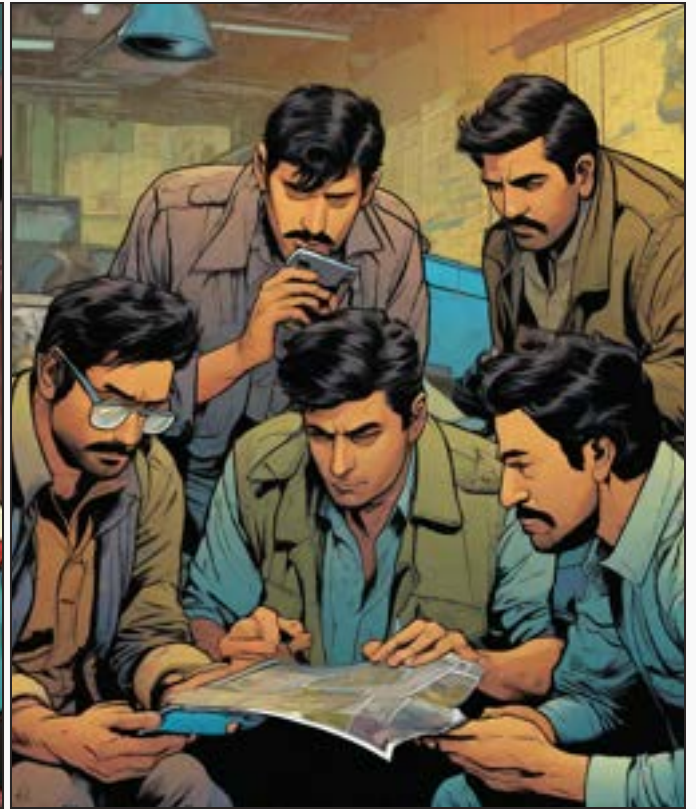
In the midst of this escalating standoff, Hammad and Hassan darted through the fray, lenses capturing snapshots of defiance and resilience. Saad and Ali, unwavering in their principles, confronted instances of police aggression head-on, voices raised against injustice. Meanwhile, Hamid meticulously documented every tumultuous twist of the clash between authority and dissent.

Yet, the situation took a troubling turn when Saad, Ali, and Hamid—alongside other protesters—got arrested and were taken to the local police station.



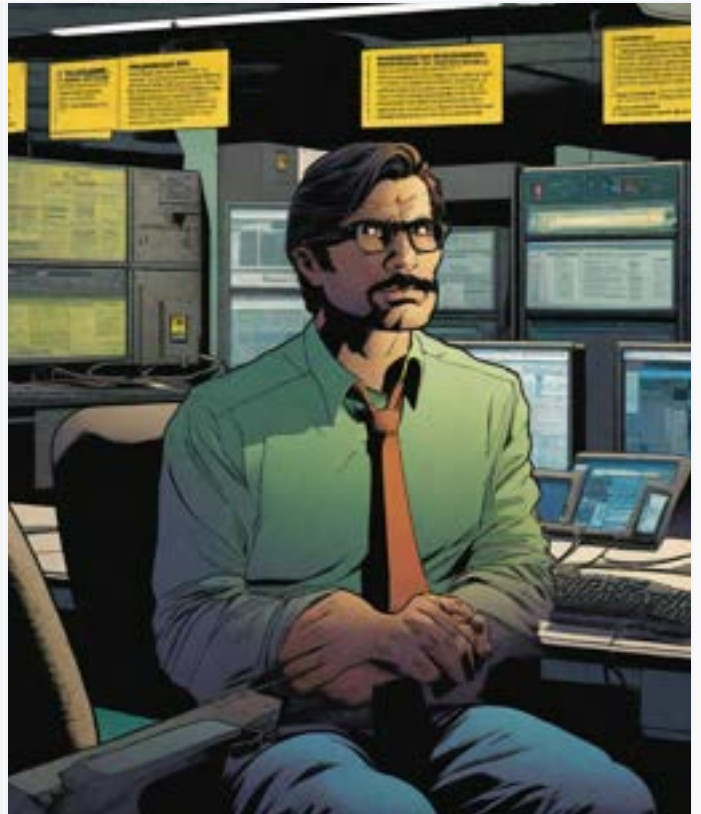
Upon arrival at the local police station, officers confiscated the mobile phones of Saad, Ali, and Hamid, along with those belonging to other detained protesters.

Saad, Ali, and Hamid had taken precautions, bringing only their work phones, which—while lacking personal details like contacts or photos—contained sensitive government-sponsored apps. These apps, designed to collect Personally Identifiable Information (PII), stored crucial data like names, addresses, and citizen IDs in plaintext on their devices.



The confiscated phones were swiftly handed over to police technical teams with root access, who extracted and logged this information into official records. This breach of privacy afforded authorities an intrusive glimpse into the journalists' lives, paving the way for heightened surveillance.

Later that day, the three journalists were released along with their mobile phones.



Following their release later that day, Saad, Ali, and Hamid thought the worst was behind them. However, the ramifications were far-reaching. Police shared the journalists' data with Internet Service Providers (ISP) and state entities overseeing data servers, enabling real-time monitoring of their movements and potential VPN usage.

Saad's vocal stance against corruption drew particular ire from a local officer, Reza Shah. Exploiting connections, Shah conspired with a rogue ISP actor named Jawad Ahmad to fabricate evidence against Saad. Using state-sponsored apps, they intercepted communications between Saad's phone and servers, planting false incriminating data.



Armed with this manufactured evidence, authorities swiftly issued arrest warrants for Saad, his fate sealed by the very technology meant to protect citizens. Armed with knowledge of Saad's address obtained through state-sponsored apps, police wasted no time in apprehending him.



For Hammad, Hassan, Saad, Ali, and Hamid, their fight for justice had become a precarious dance on the tightrope of press freedom and personal safety. As they navigated a labyrinth of deceit and surveillance, their resolve to expose truth and uphold democracy burned brighter than ever in the face of mounting adversity.

While Saad was put behind the bars; Hammad, Hassan, Ali, and Hamid continued their struggle for justice and freedom of speech.