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Young Pakistanis turn to Web for protest



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By ROBIN McDOWELL, Associated Press Writer

28 minutes ago

ISLAMABAD, Pakistan - Angry over emergency rule, Pakistani students are starting to demonstrate against their military ruler. And they are using the Web as well as the street to make their point.

Samad Khurram said updating his online newsletter, the Emergency Telegraph, has practically become a full-time job. Offering advice on everything from avoiding arrest to staging "flash" rallies and organizing petitions, it is e-mailed to some 6,000 people.

With independent TV news off the air, the Emergency Telegraph also provides links to Web sites with streaming video, as well as media contacts, inspirational references to figures like Che Guevara and messages from detained human rights activists and judges.

"If my family knew what I was doing they would put me under house arrest," joked the 21-year-old, who is taking a semester off from Harvard. "And they would definitely take away my computer."

Lawyers have been the standard-bearers for dissent since Nov. 3, when President Gen. Pervez Musharraf imposed a state of emergency, saying it was needed to address Islamic militancy and stabilize the country.

Critics say the general is trying to maintain his hold on power, noting that one of his first steps was to oust all Supreme Court judges who could have disqualified his re-election as president in a vote last month by national and provincial legislators.

Most rallies this month have been quickly and often violently stamped out, and thousands of people have been jailed, including cricket star-turned-politician Imran Khan, considered by many a symbol of the youth movement.

Muhammad Naveed, a student from Punjab University in the eastern city of Lahore, said many young people worry about what will happen to those detained.

"We are afraid the government will register cases against the students under the amended army act," he said, referring to measures that allow military courts to try

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civilians accused of committing treason or sedition or "giving statements conducive to public mischief."

In the worst-case scenario, they could be sentenced to death, though jail time or fines would be more likely.

There are signs students are growing more courageous.

In the largest campus rally yet, 2,000 students gathered Thursday at a university in Lahore, chanting "Go, Musharraf, go!" and "Long live Imran Khan!"

Earlier this week, police rounded up dozens of high school students who marched in the capital, Islamabad, with their mouths taped shut to protest a crackdown on the news media. They were later freed.

But for now, many students feel more comfortable behind their computers, writing blogs, taking part in chat rooms, updating lists of detainees or lobbying politicians and Pakistanis overseas.

Others circulate mobile phone text messages — perhaps one of the most effective means of dissent with more than 70 million cell phones nationwide, said Adnan Rehmat, who heads Internews Pakistan, a Washington-based media watchdog group.

"This is how people are really networking, expressing themselves," he said. "People are sending messages of solidarity, relaying information about protest sites, that sort of thing."

Students have been active in Pakistan in the past, especially in the years after independence from Britain in 1947, but many have become disillusioned with politics following a series of corrupt and authoritarian regimes.

"Students were pretty apathetic, but that's changing," said Khurram, author of the Emergency Telegraph. He said that as soon as Musharraf ordered his crackdown, he and his friends began brainstorming by instant message.

"We all agreed it was time to take a stance," he said.

Momentum appears to be growing, especially at elite schools in Lahore.

The arrest of Imran Khan on Wednesday at a student demonstration could add impetus to the movement, said Rashid, who edits a blog called the Emergency Times. He asked to be identified by only one name for fear of retribution.

Many parents, who know how brutally dissent can be crushed, oppose activism by their sons and daughters.

"Our parents are saying, 'Please, save your lives'," said Asif Ahmed, 22, an anthropology student and Khan supporter who has joined the protests despite her parents' pleas.

"I am determined to bring a revolution to Pakistan," she said.

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On the Net:

Emergency Telegraph: http://www.chapatimystery.com/images/Edition_1.pdf

Emergency Times: <http://pakistanmartiallaw.blogspot.com>

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Associated Press writer Matthew Rosenberg in Lahore contributed to this report.

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