

Full Length Research Paper

Critical analysis of press freedom in Pakistan

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Press freedom has never been consistent in Pakistan. Different regimes used legal and constitutional means to control the press from public debate and criticism. In its sixty years of history, Pakistan has been ruled by military more than the civilian. Press in Pakistan usually faces threats, violence, economic pressure, etc. The country's law on blasphemy has been used against journalists. Poor literacy, urban orientation of the press, and the high price of newspapers are detrimental factors for the under development of print media in Pakistan. Beside these barricades, one can now easily notice a shift from the centralized broadcasting to an open competition broadcast system in Pakistan, enabling the audience to enjoy more power of selective exposure. All governments including the military say high about the press freedom but often thing the other way round when the press criticizes the government. However, during the Musharraf military and civil regime for about nine year, press was operated in a mixed character. In view of this situation, Pakistan's place in the Reporters sans Frontiers - Annual Worldwide Press Freedom Index is 152 out of a total of 167 for the year 2007. However the new government of the Pakistan People's party has promised for maximum freedom of the press.

Key words: Pakistan press laws, freedom, media sociology, challenges to Pakistan media.

INTRODUCTION

Quaid-e-Azam, the founder of Pakistan says "I expect press for complete fearless." regrettably, press in Pakistan has been unsuccessful to appreciate the goal of Quaid-e-Azam. Restriction to freedom of expression is the culture of camouflage in bureaucracy (Pakistan Press Foundation, 2006). Under the press and publication of 1988, print media particularly grew rapidly and so its revenue. However it opened up the doors for yellow and lifafa (Envelop) journalism. (Earning of unlawful money by journalists). Despite all these menaces, Pakistan's print media are generally assumed among the most outspoken in South Asia (Pakistan Press Foundation, 2006).

Waseem (2006) argues that the increase of private radio and television channels in the last few years has ended domination of the state TV broadcast. Now media have become pluralistic and many viewers in Pakistan also watch international broadcast via a dish or cable. Indian entertainment channels are very popular in Pakistan. The multiple-channel broadcasting has set a new trend in the Pakistani society by giving the users more control over the communication process. Now there is a shift from the centralized broadcasting to an open competition broadcast system, enabling the audience members to enjoy more power of selective exposure.

Waseem (2006) in this regard views the private channels prefer to go by more newsworthiness of the events. Private TV Channels and the cable TV have brought the world closer to the domestic viewers, making them part of the global village. Waseem (2006) argues that beside threats and other restrictions, the private TV channels and print media frequently condemn the government for going against the spirit of the constitution, infringing democratic values, price rises, unemployment, poverty, worsening of the law and order situation. This changing phenomenon has altered perception, thought and behavior patterns of the Pakistani people towards the constantly changing political, moral, religious and social scenario of the country.

Religious and lower middle classes are criticizing some of the private TV channels for western orientation in their contents and immoral entertainment programs. In this regard, Waseem (2006) says "this concession to religious elements tantamount to recognizing their social power base." The newly elected democratic government of the Pakistan people Party has promised for more democratic and independence media regime. It would be interesting to analyze how much tolerance the new government holds to stand criticism of the enthusiastic private electronic media.

MEDIA SOCIOLOGY OF PAKISTAN

There are approximately four million circulations of newspapers in Pakistan. Among the Urdu press, Jang is considered the largest newspaper followed by Nawa-e-Waqt. Whereas, The News, Dawn and Business Recorder are the English popular newspapers. Poor literacy rates, urban orientation of the press, and the high price of newspapers are the detrimental factors for the low circulation. The circulation of newspapers per capita in Pakistan is among the lowest in the world (Pakistan Press foundation, 2006). There are about 160 million populations in Pakistan with diverse ethnic groups and languages. This diversity is also reflected in the Pakistan's media. Urdu newspapers have a broader reach than the English-language papers (Official Pakistan Government). The English papers are circulated among the elite who are considered the opinion leaders. The Urdu press is circulated among the masses. Urdu newspapers usually include scandals, politics, entertainments elements, religious items, etc. Since there is shortage of the regional press in Pakistan, people concerned of the rural areas are not highlighted mostly (Pakistan Press foundation, 2006).

Major cities like Islamabad, Karachi, Lahore, Rawalpindi and to some extent Peshawar get more news coverage than the rest of the cities in the country. The upper-middle class is over-represented than the middle and lower middle class on TV. Some ethnic groups are portrayed in a stereotype and prejudice way such as, "Pathan" as "Chokidar". Most often women are shown in inferior capacity such as, "male doctor with female nurse". In commercials most often, women are portrayed as sex objects. In the coverage of news, women portrayal is subsequently less than men. According to Najam (2007) the role of media in Pakistan has also been lethargic in terms of improving the status of women. Pakistan television (PTV) plays have a crosscutting viewership, especially among women. However, plays mostly revolve around formula-based story lines, which cast women in either submissive roles or at the other extreme as westernized glamour girls. The use of female model in the advertisement is very common but the model is not as sexy as shown in the Western countries. One study has indicated that one-fourth of magazine advertisements contain "female models" (Sarah, 2006).

Advertisement is the sole income of the press in Pakistan. Big manufacturers and organizations have considerable power to control the media content. They can suppress public messages they do not like. Government of Pakistan is the bigger provider of advertisements (33%) to the media industry. Due to this factor, media in Pakistan perform very little function of watch dog journalism.

There are evidences that journalists/reporters are making value statement about issues or about the leadership's qualities and policies. Media give importance

to some people or group by portraying them frequently and marginalizing others by ignoring them. Most of the TV programs either film or dramas portray violent behavior. Majority of news stories in print and electronic media include violence and criminal acts. Most of the violence media contents contain murder, fraud, drug, terrorism etc. Reporting of various crimes has no relationship to their relative frequency in the community. The known people include politicians, political candidates, and ministers, leading federal and provincial officials, alleged and actual violators of law. The unknown who represent 5% of the coverage are strikers, protestors, victims and rioters. The major topics of news are Government conflicts and disagreements, Government decisions, proposals, ceremonies, protest violence, crimes, scandals, disasters and investigations.

Media education is gaining grounds in Pakistan. There are about 16 universities that offer media education. The standard of existing media education in Pakistan is also improving. 10 years before majority of the journalists in electronic and print media were not journalism degree holders. Now the situation is the other way round. Now editors of the main stream media are demanding for university media graduates. The education of journalist has brought considerable change in the content presentation and sociology of the media in the country (Shakeela, 2005).

STATUS OF PRESS FREEDOM IN PAKISTAN

This article mainly discusses the freedom of press in Pakistan during the Pervez Musharraf regimes. Media situation after the February 2008 election has greatly been improved. Generally, Musharraf government followed a more liberal policy towards the press with fewer restrictions and much less manipulation. However, situation on the ground was different. Authorities used violent policy to silence critical voices in the media. According to Adnan Rehmat and Matiullah (2005) "no moment has been dull in the past years for the media in Pakistan, the gains and losses being dramatic in equal measures." Adnan and Matiullah (2005) argue that freedom of press in Pakistan shrunken in both print and electronic media during Pervez Musharraf regime by intimidating and harassing journalists. At numerous cases press was barred from covering opposition, public events, corruption and abuses of power by the public servants and tribal areas where military was engaged in operations against terrorists. There were censorship, press advice, issuance of government's advertisement to favorite media organizations, forcing off opposition leader's interview on a private television channel, dozens of reporters were beaten and arrested during the tussle between the President's election and the Supreme Court (Adnan and Matiullah, 2005).

Green Press Report (2006) highlights working in Pakistan

as an independent journalist is difficult and dangerous. The deplorable press freedom condition can be noticed from the facts that Daniel Pearl, Wall Street Journalist was murdered, force was used against journalists who were beaten and injured in the protest for restoration of Judiciary, popular private TV channels were banned during the Emergency in November 2007 and PAMRA used every means to cease criticism against government's policies on political issues and fight against terrorism.

Sohail Iqbal (2007) documents comments of various media experts on the Dec. 11 PEMRA's ordinance. [Mazhar Abbas, Secretary General PFUJ, said "it was surprising that without mentioning names the PEMRA issued warning to channels for violating its rules and went to the [extend] of accusing them of inciting violence." Sohail Iqbal says "government wanted to impose complete ban on television channels before elections or convert majority of them into state control media." Talat Hussain, director news, AAJ television, whose program 'Live with Talat' had been shut down on the orders of the government, said that "the government through PEMRA is trying to create scare among the journalists so that they resort to self-censorship." Hamid Mir, a senior anchor and Executive Editor of GEO television, whose program 'Capital Talk' was forcibly shut down said "it was an attempt to sabotage the struggle and movement of the press against black laws. He said the government as yet has not been able to prove that the reporting by television channels was damaging the interests of the State].

However, the new government of the Pakistan People party has promised for maximum press freedom and curtailing the strong hold of PEMRA on the private TV channels and cable networks.

MAJOR LAWS CURVING PRESS FREEDOM IN PAKISTAN

In Pakistan there are laws which actually permit public officials to decline to reveal information to the media. The Official Secrets Act stands government officials cannot pass information to the media without authorization. Under the rules, no official can give information to the journalists except the minister or secretary of any ministry. The process as one might gather is quite restricting. The Special Power entails that prejudicial reports shall be punishable and the government shall have the power to prohibit publication of newspapers or periodicals containing prejudicial reports. The law directly affects the fundamental right of freedom of expression and human rights. Press and Publications Ordinance of 1997 require the printing press and newspapers to register with the government for licensing.

However the government introduced a new press controlling body 'Press and Publication Regulatory Authority' (PAPRA), which advocates for more replaced exist-

ing self-regulatory mechanisms. Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority can stop any electronic broadcast relating in the name of "vulgarity" Journalists view the defamation act as replacement of the printing and publication act. The International Press Institute (IPI) the PFUJ and APNEC have showed their dismay on new defamation act. The Penal Code prescribes punishment for offences committed within and beyond Pakistan which endanger the national security, the public peace and the public morale. The act also provides that spoken or written words, visible representations do anything which is likely to be prejudicial to the interests of the security of Pakistan or public order or to the maintenance of friendly relations of Pakistan with foreign states shall be punishable. Many governments used this act as a tool to control the media. Under the panel code procedure, blasphemy is severely punishable, for example, on July 8 2003; a court in Peshawar convicted a journalist in a blasphemy case and sentenced to life imprisonment with heavy fine. He contributed a blasphemous letter in the newspaper on 29 January 2001, which caused violent protests. The Code of Criminal Procedure empowers the government to stop media content having seditious or promoting sectarianism and bad religious feeling in the country.

Martial Law regimes in Pakistan have greatly damaged freedom of press in Pakistan. All martial laws grimes curtailed all sort of press freedom and human rights. During the last eight years, a number of journalists have been charged with allegations. Media organizations were closed down. Journalist were physically assaulted, intimidated, tortured, and arrested.

A survey of 100 working journalists of electronic media of Rawalpindi and Islamabad was conducted to investigate their perception about the prevailing media condition and freedom of the press. Most of the questions were relating to media sociology, press freedom, journalists' autonomy and benefits, present government and press laws and ethics in Pakistan. Following table shows journalists responses on press freedom (Table 1).

PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES TO MEDIA IN PAKISTAN

Challenges

Mostly, government documents are labeled as confidential. Media are generally confined to big cities and prominent people. Rural and poor people's problems are usually ignored. Mostly, the print media rely on press releases which are a reflective of publicity journalism. Media owners keep journalists under their thumb by giving them contractual appointment and low salaries without benefits and allowances. Media owners are only interested in profit making and therefore not in investigative journalism. A trend of cross media ownership

Table 1. Journalist's perception about press freedom in Pakistan.

1	Are you satisfied with the overall prevailing condition of media in Pakistan?	22%	78%
2	Do you agree that media played an active role in election 2008?	70%	30%
3	Do you think implementations of the Wage Board Award can improve journalists' efficiency?	75%	25%
4	Do you agree the journalists are involved in political slanting?	71%	29%
5	Do you agree that PPP coalition government can safeguard media freedom?	15%	85%
6	Are you in favor of the existence of PEMRA?	18%	82%
7	Are you satisfied with the PEMRA new ordinance?	30%	70%
8	Do you think that press laws and ethics are roadblock to press freedom?	55%	45%
9	Do you think the present PPP government will shut down private TV channel for criticizing the government?	56%	44%
10	Do you agree with the role of media unions in protecting journalists' rights	80%	20%
11	Are you satisfied with the cable TV operators in respecting norms of the society?	27%	73%

is on the rise which is seriously affecting journalistic liberty.

The state run radio and television are used as tool for government's publicity. Government influences media contents through official advertisements. 30 percent of the advertisements being distributed to media are controlled by the government through the Press Information Department (PID). Government also controls media content through allotment of flats in big cities to senior journalists. Some time vocal journalists are given appointments in government's offices/departments to stop criticism. Since owners of media organizations are interested only in making profit, and since development stories are not profitable, therefore, they are found few and far in both print and electronic media.

Low salaried to Journalist: journalists particularly of media are paid low salary which makes them dishearten and lethargic. Lack of proper media research also limits media innovation. Audience low purchase power for media offering discourages media development. Due to lack of industrialization, there is little private commercial for the media industry. There are also reports that journalists are intimidated and killed while reporting on terrorism. Journalists are also punished in the name of sedition, disclosing official secrets, treason, and public nuisance.

Prospects

Private TV channels are operating regionally and nationally. Journalism education institutions are increasing. Young universities' graduates, both male and female are joining the media industries and replacing the non qualified media workers. New technologies are taking place in the media industry. The establishments of 50 private satellite TV channels have increased competition for the state-run TV channel (PTV). A great number of FM radios are also operating throughout the country. People choices are now given due weightage in the production of media contents. Cable TV channels and

videotapes give audience access to specialized programs and material. The film industry in Pakistan is on the decline. Viewers' turnout to cinemas is very low. Mostly people watch Indian films. Besides, educated male and female are not interested to show up in the film industry, partially because of the fact that films in Pakistan are produced with low budget and standard. The cinema circuit in the country is too small to return the heavy investment on production.

Conclusion

There is a mushrooming growth of print and electronic media in Pakistan which provides all sort of social and psychological gratification to the audience. However, this proliferation of media is meaningless, particularly, when there is an absence of access to information, and rules and regulations controlling media freedom. Pakistan's print and electronic media are not pluralistic as they are mostly restricted to the major cities and prominent people. Mostly media contents are related to politicians, political candidates, Ministers, leading federal and provincial officials, alleged and actual violators. Only 5% coverage relates to the unknown, these are strikers, protestors, victims and rioters. Major topics in the media include, Government conflicts, disagreements, decisions, proposals, and ceremonies; protest, violence, crime, scandal, disaster and investigations. The upper- middle class is over -represented than the middle and lower middle class. Some ethnic groups are portrayed in a stereotypical and prejudiced manner. Most often women are shown in inferior roles, for example, "male is the doctor and female is the nurse."

Successive governments expressed kind words for freedom of the press but often turned their back when things publish that irritate the ruling classes and consequently the press is warned. The important fact that makes Government dominant on the press self sufficiency is the 33% of the Government advertisements, which are always used as leverage to control media contents. This

leverage has considerably affected the watchdog journalism phenomena in the country. The state run broadcast TV and radio channels act as a propaganda tool of the government and using their domination in terrestrial and national radio frequency. Pakistan's place in the Reporters Sans Frontiers - Annual Worldwide Press Freedom Index, is 152 out of a total of 167 for the year 2007 is disgraceful for a country having nuclear power and population of about 16 hundred million. Let hope for the best from the newly Pakistan People's Party to ensure a realistic freedom of the press in the country

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