

Challenge of the

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channels

Mass Commu W/Alia

By Aziz Siddiqui

PTV and the Burmese channels, next to each other on the television set, are not much apart in the other category of remote control either. Their straitjackets differ only in degrees, the Burmese fancying just a tighter fit. The claim made the other day that PTV had been unprecedentedly generous to the opposition was a tad as deadpan as a Myanmar spokesman telling a BBC questioner a few days earlier that the SLORC regime in his country was devoted to the growth of democracy and the cause of civil liberties!

The control over the electronic media isn't, of course, new. Not by a long chalk. It began at the beginning, and the changes of weather haven't caused a single bloom on this arid tract. What is a bit new is a touch of sanctimoniousness and a bid to confound the critics. The others in the past were unclever in the making of their claims, these now have a certain clever-by-halfness about them.

It was claimed, for instance, that in the past four months the opposition has been given 27-odd minutes on the Khabarnama as against just 6-plus granted by the former government in all its tenure. Also that 38 opposition persons have by now participated in PTV's discussion programmes whereas in the earlier spell the opposition was kept rigorously at bay. Accept that as altogether true, ignore also who and what exactly have been admitted to grace, and yet how much of that has really mattered? A thousand drops or a hundred or none, what difference does it make in a bucket? The question is: does the PTV now, juggle with figures as it may, honestly convey an impression of the slightest change in political attitude — change for the better?

Take the next claim — that this government has introduced telecast of the parliamentary question hour. All credit. But even this, it seems rather obvious, isn't exactly in aid of the opposition. The spotlight in that programme is often not so much on the questioners as on the far more long-winded answerers. It provides the treasury benches with so much more of a photo-opportunity and with a continuous occasion for self-congratulation before a nation-wide audience. (What a hash the two sides between them make of the occasion is a different story).

What takes the cake is the justification offered — in fact, the appreciation demanded — for the television's coupling with the so-called Ehtesab Cell as its partner in slander. The argumer... the Supreme Court... the

and this could not be arranged from inside his jail. Did the Senate standing committee on information, before which too this plea was probably made, point out that there could be more feasible options, such as Zardari's being briefly transferred with the court's permission to a designated sub-jail for the transmission, or his testimony being pre-recorded with a firm undertaking that it would be telecast unedited?

Remember, though, that this is the category of political accommodation and media liberalism that does not prevent the authorities from scrapping even a heavily edited version of a pre-arranged interview of a minister of their own coalition partner in Sindh!

It is curious how unfailingly governments, once they ascend to power, lose good media sense. It should have been accepted as a truism by now that no government adds a cubit to its stature or a single breath to its life by mounting a controlled media assault on the opposition. Nor, that it thereby cuts down the opposition one whit. There is no mystery why it happens so. To cast a public stone one has to have a clean enough pair of hands oneself. Secondly, to make an accusation stick one has to establish one's fairness in the making of it. Even logic and facts take a second place to the test of there being no pre-judgment. The power over television somehow goes to the head. Those who get that power don't see that the medium is not always the message. That to get across, the message has to acquire a measure of integrity too.

There was some perverse sense in the past in the wholly partisan use of PTV. The audience then was captive. It could go nowhere else. And sheer repetition even of lies, it is believed, leaves a popular effect. But that situation has since changed. People now have plenty of choice. Perils do not become non-existent by closing one's eyes to them, and the official media bosses ought to recognize that there is a virtual exodus of audiences away from PTV. Already, apart from the hard-core loyalists, few admit to watching PTV news and the so-called current affairs programmes anymore. Many confess to getting cheesed off other programmes as well, including the plays that once used to induce such pride. A pall is said to have descended on them. Many are now dull as ditchwater.

In most other areas it is still possi-

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