

# Electronic media: critical decisions

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ELECTRONIC media in Pakistan are of vital strategic importance to our national interest, both internally and externally. Even with three PTV channels we are unable to numerically, leave alone substantively, meet our domestic media needs. Nor are we able to balance and counter the much larger number of Indian TV channels.

If there is validity to the military doctrine which asserts that we should maintain a 1:3 ratio in troop strength so as to deter conventional attacks by a larger, hostile force, then in the media sector we are already suffering from a very damaging ratio of 1:10, if not even a higher adverse ratio, vis-a-vis India.

In terms of private, independent radio and TV channels, countries of South Asia other than India, such as Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka have moved ahead of Pakistan. We need to quickly expand the number of electronic media, genuinely autonomize PTV and PBC, restructure relevant ministries and bodies and respond promptly to new trends in technology.

As the present government continues to address the concurrent problems of law and order, of governance, the economy and the social sector, there are critical decisions that need to be made in the spheres of electronic media.

Because of the relatively pervasive impact of electronic media in a country where a majority of the people are still illiterate, the required decisions on electronic media have a direct relevance to the fundamental problems that preoccupy the government's attention.

The reconstitution of the boards of PBC and PTV in August 2001 by which in-house depart-

In August 2000, the cabinet considered the revised version of the draft law. Once again approval was accorded in principle and some further improvements were suggested. Keeping in view the relatively unprecedented nature of the law for a country like ours where electronic media has remained a state monopoly for most of our existence, the decision to ask for further amendments in the draft is understandable.

After all, in a neighbouring country like India, the state monopoly on terrestrial electronic media has continued for over fifty years. Draft legislation has floundered in the cabinet and parliament for several years. The proliferation of satellite-based (as distinct from terrestrial, earth-based) TV channels of Indian origin in recent years gives a misleading impression about the speed at which India has dealt with this issue. However, in one important respect, that of permitting private companies to up-link directly to satellites from their own earth-based sources, India has left Pakistan way behind. We should have taken a similar deci-

more aptly be called the ministry of transportation. The government redesignated the telecommunication division as the information technology and telecommunication division and placed it under the ministry of science and technology in May 2000. Thus, the government has already acknowledged the need to respond to the phenomenon of convergence.

Three important decisions now need to be quickly taken. First, to shift the subject of cinema from the ministry of culture to the ministry of information and media development. This is more than merely a question of turf or of weakening one ministry at the expense of another. The inherent affinity and commonality between TV and cinema (notwithstanding their equally inherent differences) require that a cohesive approach be applied to these two media. Indeed, the proposed change will simply restore the alignment that existed up to the early 1970s.

Secondly, the subject of regulating cable TV should be transferred from PTA to the proposed PEMRA. Along with the transfer of the cinema sector from the ministry of culture as suggested earlier, this move will enable the ministry of information and media development to effectively coordinate and harmonise the formulation of beneficial policies and actions in support of these electronic media.

With the imminent deregulation of telecommunication in December 2002 and the expected earlier privatization of PTCL, there is plenty of work for PTA to do under its present chairman and the energetic leadership of the science minister.

The proposed transfer of the cinema sector and the cable TV sector to the ministry of information and media development is recommended as the first of a series of new steps to rationalize the official policy process in consonance with the requirement of convergence. The intent is not to

There is the need to create a new ministry or authority that deals comprehensively with the phenomenon of convergence. By emasculating the ministry of information, by possibly merging PEMRA with PTA, and by some other adjustments, we should create a single framework that adequately responds to the challenges of old media in new forms and of new media in entirely new forms.

mental heads have been replaced by two reputed former heads of the electronic media bodies and by officials of certain ministries is well-intentioned but inappropriate. The chairman of both corporations remains the additional secretary in charge of the information ministry and the majority of members remain officials. What is required are boards predominantly comprising eminent citizens with an informed understanding of electronic media with new legally enforceable instruments of complete autonomy and independence in line with, or close to, the BBC model.

General Pervez Musharraf is the first head of government in Pakistan's history who has publicly acknowledged the advisability of permitting private and independent radio and TV channels in Pakistan. He referred to this subject on October 17, 1999, in his first policy address to the nation as chief executive.

Equally notable is the fact that the caretaker government appointed by President Farooq Leghari in November 1996 and led by Caretaker Prime Minister Meraj Khalid was the first government to actually promulgate a law for private radio and TV known as the Electronic Media Regulatory Authority Ordinance (EMRA) in February 1997. The successor government of Nawaz Sharif deliberately allowed this ordinance to lapse after four months even though it retained several other ordinances of the caretaker government.

In April 2000, in pursuance of the chief executive's reference to the need for private electronic media, the federal cabinet decided, in principle, a draft introduced by this writer (as per) to establish the

sion earlier.

This writer resigned from the cabinet in October 2000. In January 2001 it was reported that during a presentation to the chief executive by the ministry of information and media development, it was decided to redesignate the authority as the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) instead of RAMBO. Be that as it may, from the original EMRA of 1997 to the proposed RAMBO of 2001, an autonomous new authority is inescapably required.

Another credit to the present government is the fact that it decided in January 2000 to introduce a licensing system to regulate the distribution of TV channels through cable networks.

This initiative has accelerated and vastly expanded the access of middle income and low-income families to several dozen TV channels at the relatively modest cost of between Rs 200 and Rs 500 per month. Alternative access through dish antenna for all these channels would require an immediate investment of tens of thousands of rupees.

Unfortunately, the jurisdictional issue was not addressed at the time when the decision for licensing cable TV systems was taken in January 2000. The Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) retains control of this subject. The apparent and ostensible connection between telecommunication and cable TV is misleading. While there certainly is a connection in matters of technology and hardware, the more significant connection is with the content of TV.

The government has shown its capacity to take bold decisions on realignment of divisions. For

further strengthen the propagandistic role of the information ministry. Far from it. This writer remains committed to the eventual transformation of the ministry of information and media development into becoming a body exclusively devoted to media development alone, totally discarding the propagandistic function of the ministry. This writer was collectively associated with the caretaker cabinet of November 1996 — February 1997, which redesignated the ministry with its present title substituting "media development" in place of the original word: "broadcasting."

While, in an ideal world, there may not exist the need for a media ministry, the hard fact is that in a country with a very low ranking of access to mass media and thus being a country that actually suffers from media poverty and media scarcity, there remains a need for an official media forum, at ministry or authority level, to facilitate media development and support regulatory and monitoring bodies such as the proposed PEMRA and the Press Council.

The decisions suggested above will help prepare the government to move towards the third, and possibly the most important decision. This is the need to create a new ministry or authority that deals comprehensively with the phenomenon of convergence. By emasculating the ministry of information, by possibly merging PEMRA with PTA, and by some other adjustments, we should create a single framework that adequately responds to the challenges of old media in new forms and of new media in entirely new forms. A new structural approach will also meet the challenge of enhancing the creativity