

Mass militancy against mass media

Understandably, the bigotry of the rich and the powerful remains unquestioned by the media, writes TARIQUE NIAZI

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Why do people in Pakistan choose to assault media outlets to vent their dissent? "Because we are an intolerant society" is the stock response. It is, however, unreflective to read "intolerance" in growing militancy against news organisations in the country. I would rather argue that increasing violence against the information media outlets points to the widening gap between the governors and the governed, the rich and the poor, and the powerful and the powerless. It is this power gap that is presumed to be avenged in frequent assaults on media organisations, latest being the BBC outfit in Islamabad.

One may ask how does the power gap translate into arsoning newspaper offices, hurling insults at newsmen, or manhandling them out of their workplaces? Here is how. Media, despite their democratic protestations, have been inherently power-centred, and power has been innately media-centred.

This bonding between the two grows into symbiotic relationship that eventually polishes power into mediagenic, and media power-centric. It is the media that help the out-of-power elite to step into power, and the in-power elite to stay in power. Media provide these services to power-wielding and power-seeking elites by engineering favourable public perceptions of their performance. This way, the political asset the media sell on the power elite is to their users – readers, listeners and viewers. The power elite prize the media users as politically "hot" stuff that only media can offer them. So, the media's appeal to the power-wielding power-seeking elite is only because of their customers.

Ironically, the media are not customer-driven though. They are rather power-driven. The media tend to pander to power to sustain their operational costs, make profits, expand bases, and stay competitive by recycling returns into stocks (i.e., principal assets) and flows (i.e., revenue generation). The magic

touch of manicured power does all that niftily. On the other hand, customers' subscription fees cannot even pay for the cost of production – producing a journal publication, a radio show, or a television programme. It is where the numerically strong and politically sexy media customers atrophied before the minuscule minority with bankable power. Thus, sandwiched between the power of media and the media of power (i.e., the governors, the rich, the powerful), the pressured majority squeak for their liberation. The more they squeak, the greater the pressure is brought to bear on them. In desperation, they thrash about to clasp a straw to keep them from sucking into the slush of power-crazed minority.

Sometimes, this straw appears to them in religious salvation (e.g., SSP and TJP), sometimes political emancipation (e.g., MQM), and other times social liberation (e.g., Imran Khan). The strength of these saviours, emancipators and liberators derives from the intensity of the affliction of power victims. The deeper the affliction, the louder the cry. The louder the cry, the wider the reach. The wider the reach, the quicker the response. Thus, the mass affliction is harnessed into promoting religious, political, and social causes. However, affliction-driven causes are not necessarily misguided. They are rather bound up with each other by a noble bond: Defiance of raw power. To enhance their competitiveness, skilled harvesters of mass resentment become evangelists – religious evangelists, political evangelists, social evangelists – and as such persuade the people into accepting their causes.

Why does evangelism degenerate (or regenerate) into militancy? I sense two reasons

for evangelical militancy: (a) absence of alternative media for special interests in Pakistan, and (b) the relative neglect of alternative voices in the mainstream media that remain dominated by the power elite. When the poor majority remains unheard, unseen and unread in the mainstream media, and the microscopic minority of the rich and powerful is heard, seen and read all over the media space, the sting of the power gap begins to sharpen into a stab. The poor majority, weakened by power abuses and shut out of the media space, begins to lose faith in their respective causes. Their vulnerability to the power-media coalition strikes their violent impulse, and their leadership sanctifies violent means for putting across their points of view as "persuasion by coercion".

Invariably, Pakistani news organisations have been victims of "coercive persuasion" on two counts: (a) either they denied their attackers the news space, or (b) they presented them in dimmer light (such as the BBC is presumed to have done, that allegedly led to violence against their outfit in Islamabad). Coercive persuaders want news space to enhance their competitiveness, and flattering lights to enhance their appearance. In the given circumstances, they are vulnerable on both counts. They are outcompeted by the power elite because of the maldistribution of news space, and because of their characterisations in national as well as international media as "fanatics", "insurgents", "sectarians", and "terrorists" (FIST). As a result, their violent outbursts against such characterisations liberate them from their perceived vulnerability to the power-media coalition. The question of interest here is that how did media err to run over the poor?

Here is how.

(1) The media have been echoing the elite's monologue for the past fifty years: Pakistan is passing through difficult times; close your ranks; tighten your belt; bear hardships bravely; "ask not what your country can give you, but what you can give your country" (the latest being a "plagiarized" addition to power rhetoric). Media never interrupted this 50-year long monologue to let better voices get heard. This has been abuse of a scarce public resource – the news space – that belongs with the poor majority of this nation, and not with media organisations.

(2) The media failed to question the power elite that had abandoned the socio-economic agenda. As a result, the poor majority of this country was tossed out as "damaged goods" – like raped women – never to be claimed again.

(3) Media failed to appreciate the mass defections to the "fanatics", "insurgents", "sectarians", and "terrorists" (FIST). Should they look into these defections, they would know that the masses were clustering around the FIST because of their abandonment by the power elite, and not because of the FIST's message appeal. Along the way, however, FIST had changed their message into medium: adoption of a pro-poor and anti-rich rhetoric.

(4) Over the past fifty years, Pakistani media have been unfair to the poor majority by indicting them with "religious bigotry" and "political intolerance", just because they dared to bare their souls scarred with lesions from power abuses. Also, the BBC's protested documentary questions the "religious bigotry" of the poor majority of this country, which, I believe, serves the anti-poor agenda.

Instead, the BBC ought to have asked in the documentary: How intolerant is the rich minority that is keeping poor generations after generations of hapless millions, from the ghettos of Harlem to Johannesburg to Korangi to Manchester to Surat. Understandably, the bigotry of the rich and the powerful remains unquestioned by the media. My heart goes out in sympathy to Zafar Abbas and Daniel Lak, and particularly to their families, but they ought not to be "blindsided" by the specific instance of personal violence against them. They must read into their hurts the broader picture of intolerance and bigotry of the powerful elite in this country, who have long been denying the poor majority political and economic space by committing structural violence against them – massification of poverty, feminisation of frailty, and gentrification of Pakistan by tearing it into cute cutouts of E-7s, F-10s, Cliftons, Gulbergs and Defences.

It is about time that information media organisations work towards narrowing the power gap by empowering people – putting their voices back on the airwaves and in the newspapers. They ought to wrest the agenda-setting power from the elite by making optimal use of the scarce resource of news space for public good – advancement of the socio-economic agenda. A Pakistan that tops 150 countries in corruption, 120 countries in human erosion (i.e., human underdevelopment), and all Asian countries in income inequalities, its leadership is a bad company for media moguls to keep. The sooner they begin to part with this bad company and err on the side of the poor – when the poor are up against the powerful – the richer they will make Pakistan for all of us, and the safer they will make it for Zafar Abbas and Daniel Lak.

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