

Media & politics in Pakistan

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Dawn
28-11-89

THE media in Pakistan has come of age. While the electronic media continues to be state-controlled, the print media is by and large free in choice of words, analytical approach and the mode of expression. In some cases, this freedom has degenerated into yellow journalism. However, the press has generally gained in terms of intellectual power and social prestige in recent years.

How come the media has moved forward while other sectors of public life including local government, district administration, party activity, public corporations as well as the national and provincial assemblies have grossly declined in terms of performance? Successive governments led by feudal or capitalist politicians found the media irritating and distasteful. It is understandable because in their respective areas of influence, uncontrolled expression of opinion was considered immoral and reprehensible. Generals on top of martial law governments further raised the level of oppression of the media by institutionalising it. Nothing in their professional experience had sensitised them to the need for a free expression of opinion.

The strength of the media in Pakistan grew by default rather than by design. Initially, the actively unrepresentative governments at the Centre and in provinces sought to control such powerful sections of the population which were socially and economically ascendant but which remained politically unrepresented. The media served as a surrogate for them. This model was typical of the 1950s. Under Ayub, the media's role as a surrogate expanded to incorporate all political and democratic forces right, left and centre. Not surprisingly, Ayub considered the media's role as disruptive, obstructionist and unpatriotic.

Under the PPP government in the 1970s, the media emerged as a battlefield by proxy. Various elite groups had opposed the PPP in the 1970 elections, among them landlords, bureaucracy, big business, professional middle class and ulema. The phenomenon of an ideological conflict between the right and the left reflected the political differences between the PPP government and the opposition. This period represented the unfinished agenda of the 1970 elections whereby mass mandate provided legitimacy to the PPP which, however, lacked credibility with certain powerful groups. Various newspapers tended to become party organs. Under Zia, while the political roles of the PPP and anti-PPP elements were reversed, the media was no more allowed a role even as a surrogate battlefield.

The media acquired a distinct role for itself independent of the deterministic hold of the political conflict operating at the national level sometimes during the late 1980s. Under the first Benazir Bhutto government, the Press enjoyed maximum freedom. During the last five years, the media has assumed a personality of its own, reflecting a variety of political attitudes rooted in ideolog-

ical, ethnic, religious and professional interests. More than academic institutions, Bar associations, chambers of commerce and various NGOs, it is the media which has reflected the political scene in earnest. It has kept social agenda alive which had otherwise reached the point of extinction. It has kept successive governments on their toes and thus served as an instrument of public accountability.

The fact that various media persons have taken to a formal or informal political career reflects the involvement of the Press in political fortunes of rulers. Among journalists-turned-public activists can be included many writers ranging from the celebrated editor of *Dawn* Altaf Husain to Z.A. Suleri and, in more recent times, Mushahid Hussain, Hussain Haqqani, Maleeha Lodhi, Agha Murtaza Pooya, Fasih Iqbal and Qazi Asad Abid. This phenomenon partly reflects interdependence between players on the political stage on the one hand and opinion makers operating in public life at large on the other.

The newspaper readers expect that media

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should follow a professional line instead of getting bogged down by party line. Certain dailies, weeklies and monthlies, which maintain a credible level of independence such as *Dawn*, *The News*, *Nation*, *Muslim*, *Jang*, *Friday Times*, *Herald* and *Newsline* are comparable with the best anywhere in the Third World. As opposed to them, *Nawa-i-Waqt* has been reduced to the position of a party organ, in the category of *Aman* and *Musawat*. Their close association with the PML(N), MQM and PPP respectively has cost them in terms of professional standing.

The Islamic media has been generally represented by weeklies and monthlies such as *Khuddamuddin*, *Takbir*, *Zindagi*, *Talu-e-Islam*, *Tarjuman-ul-Islam* and *Urdu Digest* for many decades. Obviously, newspapers could not be brought out if they were ideologically oriented

because news are not ideological *per se*. Therefore, Islamic newspapers are absent from the news stand. Even the Islamic weeklies essentially contain a critical viewpoint expressed from the perspective of political arithmetic of certain Islamic parties, especially Jamaat-Islami, rather than from an Islamic point of view in a doctrinal sense. These magazines contain a lot of commentary on contemporary politics of Pakistan.

The regional Press is constrained by a limited appeal in a geographical sense or by the use of an ethnic language. *The Balochistan Times* and *The Frontier Post* essentially cater for the articulate sections of the population in Balochistan and the NWFP respectively. However, certain sections of the local military-bureaucratic elite, intelligentsia and professional middle class continue to read English papers published outside these provinces. Within the ethnic media, Sindhi Press represented by such papers as *Jago*, *Ibrat* and *Hilal-i-Pakistan* is more significant than the Pushto and Balochi Press in terms of political importance.

Investigative journalism is still in infancy in Pakistan. Whatever investigation into the prevalent social, economic and administrative problems is done, it carries less weight than required, given the forces tearing the social fabric down. On the other hand, political scandals get full attention of the entertainment-starved middle class of this country. Controversial revelations have often made headlines exposing the abuse of political power in administrative and financial matters. Political columns of Kamran Khan, Kaleem Omar and Ardesher Cowasjee attract a lot of attention. Overall, investigation in the field of journalism remains a comparatively less attractive pursuit in Pakistan.

The English Press as compared to the Urdu Press is relatively less heavy with ideology, hyperboles, emotionally charged discourse and one-dimensional approach. Irshad Ahmed Haqqani remains an eminent exception to this rule. The English Press has a variety of expressions and tastes, ranging from Eaqbal Ahmed's penetrative analyses of the global currents of power politics to Ayaz Amir's passionate observations about men and matters operating on the political scene of Pakistan.

On the other hand, the Urdu Press is generally more vibrant, better-informed and closer to the heart of the people. It serves as a barometer of the political mood of the general public. Columnists of the Urdu Press, ranging from Mujiburehman Shami at one end to Kishwar Naheed at the other, reflect the interests of a variety of social and political groups with both the capacity and the will to influence politics out in the field.

The media's role in politics of Pakistan has not been fully appreciated. Its variations in the form of ethnic, regional, religious, English and vernacular media have played a decisive role in this country. Understanding the dynamic and positive role of the media is the first step in the direction of institutionalising the societal input in the decision-making process on top. The media as a watchdog of public life is as important as the state itself.