[**Media and their marching tunes**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1719651/media-and-their-marching-tunes)

[Jawed Naqvi](https://www.dawn.com/authors/280/jawed-naqvi) Published November 8, 2022 Updated about an hour ago

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TWO long marches are underway, albeit with opposite purposes and with unequal media attention.

Imran Khan’s journey to Islamabad could, not [for the first time](https://www.dawn.com/news/1691441), tilt Pakistan sharply to the religious right. Rahul Gandhi’s [longer march](https://www.dawn.com/news/1708902) on the other hand is aimed at liberating Indian politics from its communal and divisive trajectory, to rebuild the country’s inclusive, democratic sinews.

**Read:** [*Marching against a ticking clock*](https://www.dawn.com/news/1716823)

Pakistan’s media is divided over Imran’s quest and also the method, which is not entirely unexpected. It’s a feature of democracies that newspapers and TV channels almost always offer competing choices, intellectually and ideologically. It is thus that Imran Khan can challenge the Pakistani state and yet grab a fair share of presence in distant cities and countryside, as do his critics.

The Indian case is the opposite. Be it his visual presence or with regard to Rahul’s sound objectives, the dominant media has almost completely airbrushed the unexpectedly popular marathon walk.

This studied aloofness could not be possible without a nudge from the media’s powerful minders, corporate and political. Lal Krishna Advani said of Indian journalists that Indira Gandhi asked them to bend but they preferred to crawl. Not entirely factual, some newspapers carried blank spaces rather than censored news. And journalists too went to jail. Yet Advani’s assertion cannot be ignored. The old ideological breach in the media has become a yawning chasm under the right-wing dispensation.

One can only hope that Rahul Gandhi does not have to pay an Imran Khan-like price or attract the wrong headlines.

Some of the best intellectuals who shaped Indian media’s probity and professionalism are currently in jail as alleged left-wing extremists. While Kashmiri journalists have borne the brunt of the pro-Hindutva state’s ire, no one who dissents is spared elsewhere.

Those that have survived are under relentless pressure to compromise. *The Wire*, which came up as an online option for courageous and quality journalism is fighting, as are some other brave outfits, their battle for survival. *The Wire*’s offices were raided last week and editors had to surrender their phones and laptops to the police. Remember, it was *The Wire* that led the campaign against intrusive surveillance of intellectuals, politicians and journalists through Israel’s military grade Pegasus snooping device.

The state was waiting for an error and it pounced on the opportunity when *The Wire* published a story by a less than trustworthy reporter making a false claim against a BJP official. The editors accepted the blunder and expressed sincere regrets, usual practice in newspapers the world over. *The Guardian* carried a collection of its errors to celebrate 200 years on the job recently.

*The Wire* with a few online outfits, a couple of newspapers and possibly a solitary TV channel are all that one has to present any challenge to the state’s near total control on the narrative, whether it is the Morbi bridge tragedy or Rahul Gandhi’s march. This is today happily different in Pakistan.

While Gandhi is severely disadvantaged in the given state of play, Imran — thanks to the surfeit of TV channels unveiled surprisingly by former dictator Pervez Musharraf — doesn’t suffer from any lack of eyeballs or praise. The [murderous assault](https://www.dawn.com/news/1718659) on him is expected to only raise his media visibility. On the other hand, one can only hope that Rahul Gandhi does not have to pay an Imran-like price or attract the wrong headlines. His cross-country walk, while needed to revitalise India’s democratic spaces, makes him a target to powerful adversaries.

On a closer look it would seem that Imran Khan’s right-wing tendencies and Narendra Modi’s success with obscurantist audio-visual jugglery, are products of a shared phenomenon. Theirs can be framed as a mediaeval worldview that has cornered mass frustration with the political status quo and the economic doldrums it brought. It’s not that between the Congress and the BJP one is less neoliberal than the other. Journalist Arun Shourie once memorably described the BJP as “Congress plus the cow”.

As screws are tightened on the Indian media to squeeze out the remaining spaces from the opposition, the media in Pakistan with all their ideological and political variations at least offer a chance to as many sides as there are in the battle for sound bytes and headlines.

Between Imran and Rahul, one has the demeanour of the Pied Piper marching his quarries to the political cliff; the other reminds us of Benjamin the mule from Orwell’s Animal Farm. The mule intuitively knew and yelled out to his fellow animals that they were being sent to the knackers. He failed to elicit the life-saving response, which hopefully would not be the case with Rahul.

**Analysis:** [*Long march, familiar yet uncertain*](https://www.dawn.com/news/1717273)

Moreover, the power of the media does tend to be overstated. If the state-backed media had its way, there would perhaps be no opposition governments in any state in India. These parties won their democratic spaces despite an adversarial media. That’s a blessing. What then needs to be done for the weakening democracies to become more media friendly and the media to become more democracy friendly?

“What has to be done is not really specific to the media,” says Noam Chomsky with usual insights. “The need is to develop a more functional democratic society, a more democratic culture,” he told Delhi’s *Outlook* magazine not long ago.

The elites everywhere want the public to be disciplined, passive, obedient and directed to other things. The advertising industry thus took root in the freest countries in the world — England and the US — around World War I. “It was developed very consciously, out of the understanding that enough freedom had been won by popular struggle and the population could not be controlled by force.

“Therefore, it was thought necessary to control attitudes and beliefs … If we can direct people to that, they will keep out of our hair, we can run things. You see that in India, certainly.” Ergo: Modi and Imran may be better than their opponents at advertising themselves. Some in the media know it, others don’t.

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