

# Power of the pen

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Journalists have always figured in the politics of the country. They wield great influence on government policies through their writings and also by building and maintaining personal contacts with political leaders. Some of them frequently take sides and are rewarded adequately for picking the winning horse. Their support for a political leader does not entirely stem from opportunistic motives. Some sincerely believe in the leader they promote while others may do so for the sole purpose of sharing the pie.

Strangely enough, unlike Britain and the USA, it is not usually the newspaper owner who reaps the harvest. Although he sets the policy of his newspaper, it is his editor, columnist or reporter who is prized by the political leader. The Haroon brothers, Yusuf and Mahmood, owners of *Dawn*, were politicians in their own right. They have served at gubernatorial and ministerial posts because they were active politicians and not for their writings. Mahmood Haroon has the ability to serve dictators and democratic orders in equal measure of loyalty. His successor in Sindh, Governor Kamal Azfar, is following in his footsteps.

Governor Azfar, like his predecessor, does not mind any setup as long as he has a place in it. His political career shows that he is not choosy, a commendable characteristic in politics. He has served Z. A. Bhutto, Mustafa Jatoi and Benazir Bhutto with unbounded loyalty. He is now serving Farooq Leghari sans any qualms of conscience. He had rehabilitated himself in the court of Benazir Bhutto by eulogising her in his newspaper contributions. His articles are the best, or maybe the worst, examples in the art of flattery. He exploited this bent in Benazir's nature shrewdly and to the hilt. She rewarded him first with a Senate seat, to the chagrin of the PPP. Then she appointed him governor of Sindh where he sits pretty while Benazir is gone. Similar is the case with Senator Shafiqat Mahmood, the successor to Asif Zardari in the Ministry of Environment. He got benefaction of a Senate seat from Benazir Bhutto by praising her to the skies in his newspaper articles. Perhaps we would soon be reading articles by these two gentlemen glorifying the present realities.

The late Altaf Hussain, editor of *Dawn*, was the first journalist to become a federal minister. He had a powerful pen. His editorials could unnerve a government and unmake a prime minister. It was a clever move by the government. As a minister he lost the power of his pen, a Samson with his hair shorn. No more could he sermonise or terrorise the government.

His contemporary, Z.A. Suleri, past 80 and going strong, has been in jail for his writings. He suffered imprisonment not during the frequent martial laws but in democracies. He has a scathing pen that does not spare friend or foe in the context of Pakistan's ideology. He did a short stint during the 1965 war as the spokesman of GHQ in the rank of colonel. He also has the distinction of being the first PPP casualty when freshly sworn-in President Z.A. Bhutto fired him from the post of editor of *The Pakistan Times*. It was the first administrative act Mr Bhutto took as President of Pakistan.

Mr Bhutto appointed Nasim Ahmed, *Dawn* reporter in London, as information secretary; Khalid Hasan, a reporter of *The Pakistan Times*, became his press officer. But they did not last long. Bhutto sent them both on diplomatic posts. Gen. Zia-ul-Haq was on friendly terms with many newspaper owners and journalists. He would ring them up late at night to exchange views. He ruled long but never appointed a newsman to any post in his government except once: Mustafa Sadiq, editor-owner of *Wifaq*, was inducted as information minister in the caretaker cabinet after ousting Junejo.

Benazir Bhutto has always been fond of journalists, especially those who accepted her as the undisputed leader and would write columns upon columns exalting her deeds. Wajid Shamsul Hasan, editor of *Daily News* (evening) and columnist of *Mag*, never once wavered in his belief that Benazir Bhutto was the destiny of Pakistan. Whether Benazir was in or out, he never stopped eulogising her in his weekly column. He had no other subject to write about except Benazir. In her first stint as prime minister, Benazir appointed him as chairman of the National Press Trust. In her second term she sent him to London as Pakistan's high commissioner. He resigned his post immediately following the ouster of Benazir. Bashir Riaz, *Nawa-i-Waqt* correspondent in London, was and continues to be in the inner-circle of Benazir Bhutto. She made him the chairman of Media Foundation when she became prime minister the second time.

Maleeha Lodhi, editor of *The News*, Rawalpindi, changed horses at the right time and thus became the darling of Benazir Bhutto. She was amply rewarded with the most prestigious, important and senior diplomatic assignment: ambassador to the USA. She has performed remarkably well and better than many of her illustrious predecessors in Washington. President Leghari has decided to retain her and she has consented. This has irked Benazir Bhutto to remark: "I don't want to hear her name ever mentioned in my presence again."

Agha Murtaza Pooya, owner of *The Muslim* and its chief editor for some time, also dabbles in politics. He heads the party founded by himself. He once contested elections but lost. Benazir made him her minister not because of his political weight, but for the unreserved support that *The Muslim* gave her after the ouster of Nawaz Sharif.

Hussain Haqqani, a very capable journalist who represented a foreign journal and has been a regular contributor to national dailies, was picked up by Prime Minister Mian Nawaz Sharif as his press secretary. Later, he sent him to Sri Lanka as high commissioner. When the Ishaq-Nawaz tussle became known, Hussain Haqqani rushed to Islamabad and changed his allegiance in a jiffy. Benazir first appointed him as her press chief, then made him information secretary. From there he was moved to House Building Finance Corporation as its managing director. The caretaker government has relieved him from this post.

The journalist who wielded real power and influence in the Benazir government was Azhar Sohail. He earned the liking of Benazir Bhutto not by his writings alone. It was his prowess to enthral his listeners with his conversation that fascinated her. He is a great story-teller. He possesses excellent memory. He can recall an event, a couplet, a face and the past utterances of a politician with the ease, accuracy and speed of a computer. His TV commentary that mostly mocked the national dailies had endeared him further to the PM House. He was holding a minor post, director-general of Associated Press of Pakistan, but he had instant access to the prime minister. The ministers and bureaucrats waited upon him and sought his help to promote their careers. He is now languishing in jail.

President Leghari has picked two journalists as his ministers who through their writings have been applauding him for the last year and a half. They are Irshad Ahmed Haqqani, editor of *Jang*, Lahore, and Najam Sethi, editor-owner of *The Friday Times*. Both were once great admirers of Benazir Bhutto, but not any more. Mr Haqqani knew all the answers to the problems Benazir Bhutto was facing or had created. He wrote voluminously urging her to follow his advice or face the consequences. Benazir Bhutto chose the later. Mr Sethi also was a self-appointed counselor of Benazir Bhutto. He has reprinted, in chronological order, all the advice he rendered to Benazir Bhutto. Alas, Benazir did not pay any heed and is now out and Mr Sethi is in. His journal, *The Friday Times*, has gone the extra mile to scandalise Benazir by peeping into the bedroom of the deposed couple.