

Radio, TV, press—loud silence

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Imagine a situation in Pakistan in which only one newspaper can be published. All the shares of the company that publishes this sole newspaper are owned by government. The publisher, the editor-in-chief, the editor and the senior assistant editors in-charge of every department of the newspaper are also appointed by the government. For about 23 years there is only this one newspaper that originates from within Pakistan.

Then a second newspaper is also launched.

The only difference is that instead of owning 100 percent of the shares of the second newspaper, the government owns 54 per cent shares. But by virtue of its majority continues to control all the executive appointments and appointments to the post of publisher and editor. In this case, a variation is introduced. Instead of the government-appointed staff shaping the contents of the newspaper or managing the commercial income from advertising and other sources, the government gives the contract for the entire space of all the newspaper pages to a single private party without allowing other private parties to get a similar privilege. To ensure that even the second newspaper echoes the same editorial policies as the first newspaper, the second newspaper is obliged to reproduce the editorial of the first newspaper without any change.

If what successive governments of the past 30 years have done to the TV sector of our country were to be done to the print sector, then the situation defined above would become absolutely true. For the "first newspaper" read "PTV" and for the second, read: "STN". The joke is upon the people: so easily beguiled by the glamour of the sound and moving pictures of TV that we permit a flagrant violation of our right to a balanced and fair presentation of national political news.

While we would probably never accept the imposition of government monopoly on the press we have, and continue to accept, the perpetuation of the state's stranglehold on the electronic media without a fraction of the concentrated and well-organised protest that we have made against attacks on the freedom of the press.

The precedent was set by the state monopoly over radio which began with the very inception of Pakistan over 48 years ago. Conditioned by this early monopoly in radio, we have simply accepted the introduction and re-enforcement of the state monopoly in TV which began about 30 years ago.

To be fair, Pakistan is not alone in this pattern. In most developing countries, the state and the government have tended to be extremely possessive exploiters of the electronic media. Yet whereas the trend has

been changing in developing countries for the past 20 years, we in Pakistan have steadfastly retained the government's monolithic dominance over the electronic media. Even authoritarian systems like those in the Marcos' era in the Philippines in the 1970s permitted the establishment of private TV stations.

In allowing a private sector party to handle the programming and advertising content of the STN channel, government has only conceded cosmetic ground because STN is obliged to telecast the same news bulletins and sometimes the political programmes put out by PTV.

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In the case of the more recent advent of FM radio stations as well, there is no scope for the new private radio channels to reflect any of the political reality of the country except to parrot the line projected by the government of the day. To make matters worse, in the case of radio as well as TV, including the latest scandal concerning the manner in which the first cable TV system under the name of Shaheen Pay PTV has been given permission, all the contracts handed out share three sordid features. They create and foster monopolies, they were processed and awarded in a secret, non-transparent manner and they are not subject to a policy framework defined in advance.

There is a sharp contrast in the manner in which successive governments have come to observe certain minimal elements of propriety and equity in handing out contracts and permits in other sectors such as power, highways, telecommunications, petroleum, etc., and the manner in which the sector of electronic media is dealt with in an arbitrary and capricious mode utterly disregarding of basic principles of fairness

and justice. The contrast indicates all the hypocrisy as well as the insecurity that our governments suffer from when it comes to dealing with radio and TV. There is an intriguing silence in the press on these issues except for articles written by this writer in *The News* between 1991 and 1995 and except for investigative reports by Kamran Khan published in *The News* in May 1995 exposing the shenanigans of the media managers the latest report by M. Ziauddin giving several interesting details in *Dawn* on May 6, 1996, the rest of the press has made limited comment on this issue.

Considering the common ground that the press shares with radio and TV as being part of mass media, none of the major newspapers has followed through on this issue with the kind of investigative reporting and editorial comment that they devote to other subjects and scandals. The independent press remains the only medium in our country where one can obtain detailed coverage of political events and freely debate political issues. Yet it is pertinent to speculate as to whether the curious disinterest of the press in the malpractices in the award of permits for radio and TV channels has anything to do with the fact that three major newspaper groups are reported to be among those who submitted unsolicited bids for new TV channels and that these were eventually unsuccessful bids.

Government control of radio and TV and continuous misuse of executive authority to favour particular individuals are serious transgressions of the freedom of expression and of articles in the Constitution that guarantee equality to citizens and require propriety in the exercise of power. This subject does deserve far greater interest by the press.

Be that as it may, the present situation in Pakistan with regard to the continuation of the State and government monopolies over Radio Pakistan, PTV and STN and the creation of new monopolies for favoured private parties through NTM, FM-100 radio stations and the Shaheen Pay PTV channel represent the antithesis of democracy. An elective political system is supposed to ensure pluralistic media that are created and developed through an open and accountable process.

We are presently going deeper into a dark and devious phase in which there is so far no accountability for acts of commission and omission. Deluded by the pitter patter and the chitter chatter on FM radio and TV, that creates a trivialising and superficial perception of new and extended choice, Pakistan's radio and TV system continues to concede viewership and audiences to foreign media while rulers fujack the airwaves of the country. Concerted action is required to protect the vital interests of free and fair communication in the electronic media of Pakistan.