

# The Press and society in Pakistan

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**T**he Press in Pakistan has come a long way during last 52 years and small newspaper ventures that were launched mostly with meagre resources have developed into well-organised, resourceful, and influential chains of publications. Inspired by the political influence and economic success of the three well-known newspaper concerns, many others entered the field during last about 12 years but without any visible success. Almost all the new attempts in the attractive field were either by those who had nothing to do with journalism or by journalists of very little standing.

The Press and the governments in Pakistan had always been adversaries because of the desire of all the rulers to use the Press for advancing their vested political interests through more than a dozen restrictive laws that Pakistan inherited from the British colonial rulers.

The three martial law regimes went many steps further in gagging the Press from disseminating free comments and opinions. However, all governments had their favourites in the profession and they were rewarded lavishly for their services. These rewards and the influence of the favourites in ruling circles made this profession attractive for those who wanted a short-cut for political, social, and economic status. The liberalisation of declaration policy came in 1988 with the revision of most controversial Press and Publication Ordinance of Ayub era that was authored by intellectual bureaucrats

ideological commitment of the Muslim journalists.

After the reorganisation of All India Muslim League the demand for an independent state consisting of Muslim majority areas gained momentum. At this historical juncture devoted and sincere opinion leaders from the Muslims came forward who tried successfully to fill the gap that existed in the field of journalism. In Bengal there were *Azad*, *Star of India*, and *Morning News*, *Anjum* and *Manshoor* appeared from Delhi, *Khilafat* from Mumbai, and *Muslim Outlook*, *Zamindar*, and *Ehsan* were published from Lahore. The English Press was predominantly Hindu owned or directed and edited by the Britishers who were generally not sympathetic to the Muslim point of view in Indian politics. The power of Press was concentrated among Hindus as they were more organised and developed as a community.

It was at this important turning point in the history of Muslim point of view in Indian politics that the three present day important newspaper concerns, the *Nawa-i-Waqt* Publications, the *Jang* Publishers, and the *Herald* Publications Ltd., were launched with limited financial resources but with lot of devotion, sincerity and enthusiasm on the part of the founders.

The fourth company that had been launched at the closing years of Pakistan Movement, *Progressive Papers* Limited, by Mian Iftikharuddin in Lahore was taken over by the first military regime of General Ayub Khan in 1959, and handed over to the National Press Trust, a brain child of

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Ayub Khan's propaganda experts to control the Press. It finally ceased the publishing of Urdu daily *Imroz* and weekly *Lail-o-Nahar*. After the company was sold by the Nawaz government under the policy of privatisation the once popular English daily *The Pakistan Times* has since been reduced to the status of a "dummy."

A sudden growth in the newspaper industry was once recorded in the past also similar to present day surge in the number of pub-

rectual bureaucrats who worked as Ayub's propagandists and image builders. This led to the mushroom growth of the newspaper industry which in turn produced scores of untrained and inexperienced Press workers who are neither familiar with the essentials and ethics of journalism nor of some people in that profession, especially those working during the martial law regime of Zia.

Politicians all over the world want to have positive publicity for themselves, but incase of Pakistani politics, especially for the rulers, lobbying among journalists is a must as politicians keep themselves alive through Press coverage. Besides reporting based on Press statements and Press releases, new trends in column writing where most of the columnists project their contacts and friendly relations with important personalities has resulted in highly personalised journalism. The columnists not only tell their readers that they had received a telephone call at midnight from the highest authority who asked their welfare but some of them publish their telephone numbers also.

If somebody writes an anonymous letter telling them that the authorities had planned to physically eliminate them, they publish it forgetting the

the number of publications, at the occasion of the first general elections in 1970, when the nation had seen the longest election campaign for the elections on adult franchise basis after independence for the first time. A large number of dailies and periodicals suddenly appeared in the politically charged and highly polarised political atmosphere. However, all new publications ceased to appear during the political crisis that followed the elections because of the mishandling of the situation by the military regime of General Yahya, and because of the fact that the Press failed to project the political aspirations of the people. The Press lost its little credibility it had during that crisis.

The period after the 1977 martial law was marred by a new trend of use of force and violence against newspaper establishments by political, religious, and other pressure groups in a bid to force the Press to give coverage to these pressure groups according to their liking. There have been about 161 incidents of violence against newspapers and news persons during last 23 years or so. These acts of violence against the Press are over and above the pressure tactics adopted by various governments to curb the freedom of expression.

centuries old principle of journalism that anonymous information is never a good copy unless verified.

The new tradition of not having a professional editor has also adversely affected the standard of journalism. Financiers, who have other well-established businesses, not even remotely related to journalism have declared themselves as chief editors. When the printed newspapers were first introduced in Subcontinent in the 18th Century, during East India Company rule in Bengal, founders of newspapers, all in English language and owned by the British till 1822, used to be editors themselves. But journalism used to be their sole interest. When the Indians took to journalism the same tradition was followed, largely. After the annexation of India into the British Empire in March 1858, mainly the personalities who entered the field were interested in communicating opinions.

Almost all owner-editors during the long independence movement, which started soon after 1857, were good writers and community and national leaders in their own right. The Khilafat Movement in the beginning of 20th Century produced some significant specimen of journalism and produced militant journalists and popular opinion leaders. After the adoption of historic Lahore Resolution Quaid-i-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah realised that Muslim point of view in Indian politics generally lacked Press support. Very few newspapers owned by the Muslims tried to counter the Indian National Congress propaganda against Muslims and their political leadership.

One of the reason for this was that the Muslim Press was not as resourceful as their Hindu rivals were. The lack of resources for Muslim-owned newspapers was compensated by the

Apart from the violence against the newspapers and newsmen there is a growing criticism from the public on the working of the Press and "opportunism" of the journalists. After the newly-found freedom to report any statement and even hear say, the standard of reporting and writing has created more confusion instead of clearing doubts about various issues.

Violations of universal code of ethics for journalists are frequent. Successive rulers have been trying to further control the institution through persuading the publishers and the editors, which in most cases are the same persons, to formulate an agreed code of conduct. There had been five futile attempts in this direction so far during last about 40 years. However, the working journalists and their unions had never been taken into confidence over the issue. Thus all such attempts failed, as any code of conduct is directly related to the professional duties of the working journalists and without their cooperation no arrangement can be successful.

The journalists and bodies working for democratic traditions and human rights in Pakistani have lately launched a struggle for a law to ensure right to information as a fundamental constitutional right. In Pakistani style of governance and policy-making secrecy had always been the guiding principle, therefore, all governments have so far ignored this crucial demand.

If journalism has to play its important role of the fourth estate in a democratic Pakistan, the mass media will have to improve its working and efficiency and the rulers and the society will have to learn to accept dissent and criticism, only then would the Press and society be able to support each other for the success of democracy.