

# The Press as a problem

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According to V S Naipaul, 'Social inquiry is outside the Indian tradition; journalism in India has always been considered a gracious form of clerkship'. The Pakistani press has its own blind spots, its own conspiracy of silence. The operative assumption seems to be that the legalities and institutional arrangements of parliamentary democracy can be faithfully aped while leaving the cultural foundations alone. The press shares the responsibility for the intellectual standstill in the country's future economy strategy, because it resists policy reform initiatives as conspiracies of the IMF and the World Bank. The press embodies every contradiction of the guilt-ridden Pakistani middle-class, from which it obviously recruits most of its members.

Nawaz Sharif can be chastised for having given in to economically unsound populism like the *qarz utaro* scheme, but it's the press that has consistently pushed "self-reliance" and opposed "Western-conceived" economic reform policies. To oppose the whole slate of reform initiatives because its intellectual foundation is Western is a reactionary perception, rooted in ignorance of economics.

Self-reliance as a virtue is entirely overrated. With the unprecedented mobility of capital and other resources in the new global economy, the old standards of national control over resources are subject to radical reconsideration. Of course, the press has eagerly fallen in line with renewed calls for "self-sacrifice" and "self-reliance" (and the National Self-Reliance Fund) after Pakistan's nuclear blasts. But only the ultra-rich benefit from deviations from economic and political liberalism. The press doesn't see that international integration weakens the exploitative and oppressive Third World state.

Most commentators (except for a handful of expatriate professional economists who write only occasionally) seem unaware of the complex tradeoffs involved in reform as well as the inherently constrained manoeuvring room for democratically elected leaders embarking on economic reform. Lagging nearly four decades behind current economic thinking, the press still gives currency to such structuralist concepts as the "take-off" stage or the "vicious cycle of poverty" associated with first-generation development economists like Rostow and Nurkse. Ironically, the neo-structuralism favoured almost universally by the press privileges entrenched interests that have long benefited unfairly.

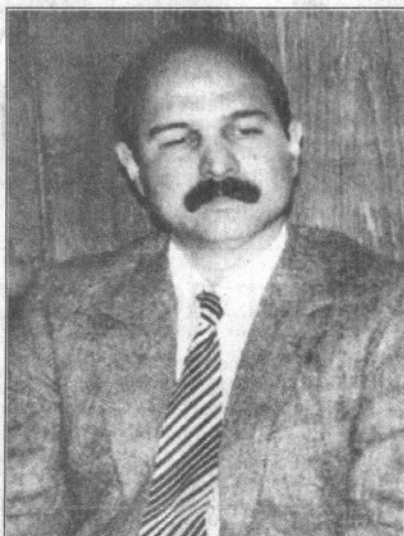
Columnists admit that they don't know much about economics but then dispense advice anyway. This

this ideologically discomfiting notion is shoved aside), Pakistan will feel the worst effects of globalisation rather than take the opportunity to creatively rethink labour, productivity, industry, and exports to make the most of the globalisation phenomenon.

So who or what does strike the press's fancy? Someone like Imran Khan, entirely a media creation. The press stuck with him all through 1995 and 1996, even after Imran's intellectual void was evident. Imran is now less interested in fundamentalism and more interested in the naive institutionalist approach to political development, as the influences on him change. Imran is an empty vessel (although to his "credit" the one thing he has consistently favored is the *jirga* system!). It used to be Hamid Gul. Now Imran sounds like a Mairaj Muhammad Khan clone.

From being a naive fundamentalist, Imran has gone on to sharing the Pakistani press's bias toward the paradigm of mechanistic institutional change that it inherited from the early post-war era, and has never discarded for more sophisticated political analyses inclusive of the cultural and economic foundations of liberal democracy. Will the print media accept responsibility for having given credence to Imran? The press fell for his "romantic heroic" image, his easy-sounding "solutions." But more to the point, the press itself is in the business of generating easy-sounding solutions, like slashing expenditure at the PM's secretariat or rejecting the advice of the IMF and the World Bank. So why should it not fall for Imran and whoever else comes along in the future promising to fight the conspiracies against Pakistan? Today, Imran himself might no longer be taken seriously by the press. But the populist ideas that Imran has always held are still the bread and butter of the press.

The press has contributed to a situation where extreme cynicism about politicians has made it difficult for any government to act on long-term, rational, authentic solutions. There's the leading columnist-turned-MPA who had a field day as long as BB was there to kick around. His departure from journalism coincided with BB's departure. There's the political economy editor who's been writing week after week, year after year, that the entire state structure has collapsed, and that the crisis has reached the point where only a revolution can solve it (revolution is the fantasy of the most intellectually benighted). There's the leading columnist who argues for a technocracy of "ten good men" (women need not apply) to lead us into the promised land. Where he'll find the ten good men to meet everyone's fantasies only he



Information Minister  
Mushahid Hussain

is usually folk wisdom, like recovering "loot" from absconders, or slashing expenditure by government functionaries or at the PM's secretariat (having bought himself domestic political space by nuclear testing, no doubt the PM should find it a small price to oblige the folkish press by deferring occupation of the opulent secretariat building).

In the entire national press, it would be difficult to identify a single popular writer who shows consistent appreciation of the complex economic dilemmas that the development community has had to deal with in order to come up with the current reform consensus.

The press has played up the late Mahbubul Haq and his Human Development Index. But that's because he was about the only economist vocal enough to get its attention. Haq, of course, was the man who fostered the twenty-two families in the first place and then one day in 1968 suddenly realised what he'd unleashed. His approach since his awakening was the "basic needs paradigm" (which he shared with Paul Streeten and others). But the press wouldn't know enough to critique him on the ups and downs of that paradigm, because it doesn't have the background to contextualise it.

In part to cater to the press, politicians like Nawaz Sharif have to come up with populist measures that can only worsen the economic situation. It's the press that opposes selling off "strategic" industries because of "national security" reasons. It's the press that despises downsizing, privatisation, and globalisation. It's the press that has an ideological hatred of free-market economics. Of course, some of the most respected names in Pakistani journalism are left-wing thinkers still beholden to Marxism or at the very least the centralising, paternalistic economic development approach known as structuralism - the approach taken by Pakistan and other developing countries immediately after the post-war independence period, when state intervention in the minutiae of development was all the rage.

The older generation of Pakistani writers takes the presumptions of structuralist development economics as gospel, and reacts to openness and free-market initiatives as anti-people. Then what else can be expected from opportunistic governments, when they have no support in the press, but to act as if they too are interested in preserving the very foundation of the economic thinking that has failed?

The neo-classical outlook of the multilateral financial institutions is only a start in the right direction. To stop the bleeding. To make it possible to be stable enough to begin thinking of long-term, sustainable growth policies. But Pakistan can't even stop the bleeding. How can the press be exonerated from being part of the problem when it virulently opposes development consensus because it is compulsively suspicious of the West? Nawaz Sharif's and other governments have been pushed into a corner.

Globalisation is irreversible. Rather than dismiss it, the press would do better to initiate a policy debate on how Pakistan can take advantage of globalisation. But if there is no debate (which can't occur as long as

knows. One would like to ask him how he can call for suspension of democracy, for that is what the installation of ten (or however many) good men would mean, while at the same time critiquing the government for its violations of liberal democracy. He is suspicious of democracy, but he criticizes the government for not being democratic enough? Which is it?

The press is the spirit behind Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif and Mushahid Hussain. Is the Information Minister supposed to stand up for downsizing and privatisation when the so-called economic writers of the press are skeptical of these policies? The Information Minister is a spin doctor. But the press constitutes the doctors that see only cancer, and no treatment for it. Unfortunately, this company of demoralised doctors is comparatively more influential in Pakistan because there aren't other compensating influences - free electronic media, liberal and research-oriented universities, well-stocked libraries, relevant and inexpensive books and journals.

The press is full of cant every step along the way. It decries sectarianism (as if sectarianism could be separated from religion!) and religious terrorism, but it doesn't question if these social pathologies exist because the intelligentsia itself has never asserted that religion should have no public role. None of the foundational propositions of secular humanism can be openly advanced in the press. There is no freedom in Pakistan to echo Voltaire's famous battle-cry: "*Ecrasez-l'infame.*" A democracy, an end to terrorist fundamentalism, when secular humanism can only be expressed in the press's own doublespeak - diluted, ambiguous? Impossible!

The concepts that the press has made taboo for discussion are precisely those that contain the seeds of potential solutions. To the extent that the press reiterates some of the fondest myths of a half-century of official brainwashing (instituted at every level of education), it pre-empted the possibility of productive debate.

Any number of issues are in silent limbo for ideological considerations. The feckless press won't touch these issues (or if it will, only euphemistically, not in direct and clear language advocating unequivocal remedies). To offend none of the protected sensibilities, no call is ever made for tough choices between incompatibilities. Rather, readers are always deluded that opposites can be mingled in harmonious non-choices. An interventionist state, but also private economic freedom; a state religion, but also no sectarianism; medieval theology, but also equal rights for women; a megalomaniac foreign policy, but also no domestic repercussions. All impossibilities, contradictions in terms.

The unembarrassed peddling of cynicism (and nostalgia for a pre-"wretched-of-the-earth" idyll) fills the gap created by self-censorship. Cynicism lets everybody off the hook, especially the ordinary upwardly mobile newspaper reader, from making informed economic choices, from reviewing cultural predispositions, from reconstructing cherished values. Wherever the press is most tremulous, most self-censoring, there are the country's most vulnerable intellectual blindspots.