

Pakistani media a free media



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Media, print or electronic, has played a very crucial role in determining the rights of people and unfurling the issues to the common man. Freedom of information is of prime concern to the UN charter, for it is the only way through which the rights are ensured by not keeping the people away from their rightful information. Media in Pakistan is in a very vibrant landscape, which has a mixed history of freedom and sanctions. The roots of Pakistani media are present in the pre partitioned British India, where the daily DAWN was founded by Quaid e Azam in 1941, and an other daily Nawa e Waqt was founded in 1940.

The basis of foundation of these newspaper was to further the cause of Muslims in a relatively hostile Hindu environment. This made the basis for Pakistani media's attitude. Pakistani media is bold and is known to endure the oppressions in different times by different governments. The key players in restricting media freedom have remained the civil and army governments. The story of media restrictions starts with the Ayub Khan's Press and Publication Ordinance (PPO) 1962.

The news agencies and print media in general were made vulnerable by this ordinance which legalized the confiscation of news papers, shutting down of news agencies and other measures against the media if the authorities felt the news reports to be anti-establishment or so. Ayub Khan's ordinance made it extremely difficult to express freely and the people were deprived of their basic right to have information. The restrictions were further strengthened by having direct influence inside the news papers by hook or crook.

The press freedom was further deteriorated by Zia ul Haq, who imposed more restrictions on the media independence. Popular “ islamization” policy of Zia also had its severe impact on the media independence. The PPO was further made strict. By that time the state owned Pakistan Television (PTV) was also playing a major role to further and present the strict policies of Zia’s regime. There were no private news channels on the scene, although privately owned newspapers, mainly The Dawn, have remained secular in their policies throughout that period.

Zia’s sudden death allowed the new government to revise the PPO and relieve the media of restrictions to ensure press freedom. The most important event in press freedom came to be in General Musharaf’s regime, where the media was provided with much liberty and many independent private news channels started. The private media channels were promoted because of a number of reasons. The most important was the realization of army that India had overshadowed Pakistan in media regarding the Kargil conflict.

Indian media was relatively free as compared to that of Pakistan, and it was realized that media must be given freedom and opportunities to have a presence in current scenario. The media has played an important role since 2003, in formulating public opinion and changing the course of politics. The fall of Musharaf government is one example to consider. The media campaign for the restoration of the chief justice was yet another demonstration of the freedom and power of Pakistani media, where Zardari government had to reinstate the chief justice.

The freedom of media has come in bits and pieces, wherein according to the Press Freedom Index the media has seen a rise in freedom in 2002 when the Musharaf government allowed new channels and relaxed the restrictions on media. The PFI rated Pakistan at 119th number. This was not to be seen later with the increased interference of media in the state matters and other related reasons. The 2008 ranking, when Musharaf government left reign, puts Pakistan at 158th number. In 2009, the ranking suggested a bit increase in restriction, with Pakistan being at 159th number.

This was early period of Zardari government. The 2010 ranking suggested that there is an increased freedom in media, where Pakistan is ranked 151st number. The ranking at such high numbers suggests, usually, that a country is a theocracy or the like. But the case with Pakistan is that Pakistan has been under the effect of war since the 9/11 and there has been an increased level of distress and disturbance at governmental as well as civil levels. The media has in this time shifted its attention from quality to quantity. This shift has resulted in over commercialization and sensationalism in the media.

The media today lacks information and is more concerned with disclosing the matters of government, the politicians and terrorist acts, rather than fulfilling its prime responsibility which is the creation of awareness among the common men. The lower ranking in PFI is also because it is dependent upon questionnaires for the journalists. Journalists are relatively unsafe today because of the war going on against the Pakistani Taliban, where every other day journalists get murdered or harassed. But this is normal in a country trying to come out of the distress of terrorism and extremism from both inside and outside.

Media is neither completely free nor chained, it is irresponsible. There is an increased influence of army on media, where the media remains silent on misdeeds of army. The sole concern of media has come out to be entertainment and criticism of politicians. And when limits are crossed by media, state comes into action to put sanctions and restrictions. Many newspapers and TV channels are owned by influential people who have a direct or indirect link with the politics. This makes it further difficult for media to completely run on the principles of democracy, freedom of expression and awareness.